

ScoTpress

ENTERPRISE -

LOG

54

ENTRIES



a STAR TREK
fanzine

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April 1983

ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello again, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 54.

Many thanks to those of you who asked about the wisdom tooth - from the tone of the letters, I could tell I'm not alone in having problems! Nasty things, teeth, and I can only admire the dedication of dentists who have to cope with patients like me. Anyway, the brute seems to be quiet at last, and my father - who has a... strange... sense of humour celebrated the occasion by giving me a bracelet charm for Christmas - a tooth firmly clutched in a pair of pincers. Any suggestions for an appropriate reciprocal present next year will be greatly appreciated.

With this issue we welcome two new contributors to ScoTpress - Geraldine Griffin, whose long story, Stars and Losers, begins this issue; and the artist Adrienne Brown, whose portrait of Spock is on Page 44. We hope to bring you more of their work in future issues.

I hope to begin soon on printing the Son of Vulcan stories by Janice Pitkethley, a series which deals with Spock's childhood, and is a follow-on to When Worlds Collide, by the same author.

I must mention here that the story, Dispeople, by Glyn and Lynda Probert, that appeared in Enterprise - Log Entries 52, was first printed by Empathy in Emanon 6. We were not aware at the time that the story had been printed before, and so did not give due credit. The sharp-eyes-and-good-memory award goes to Linda Watt, who pointed it out, and so enabled me to contact Dot Owens with our apologies.

I hope you enjoy this issue of Enterprise - Log Entries, and we are always happy to read any letters of comment you care to send us.

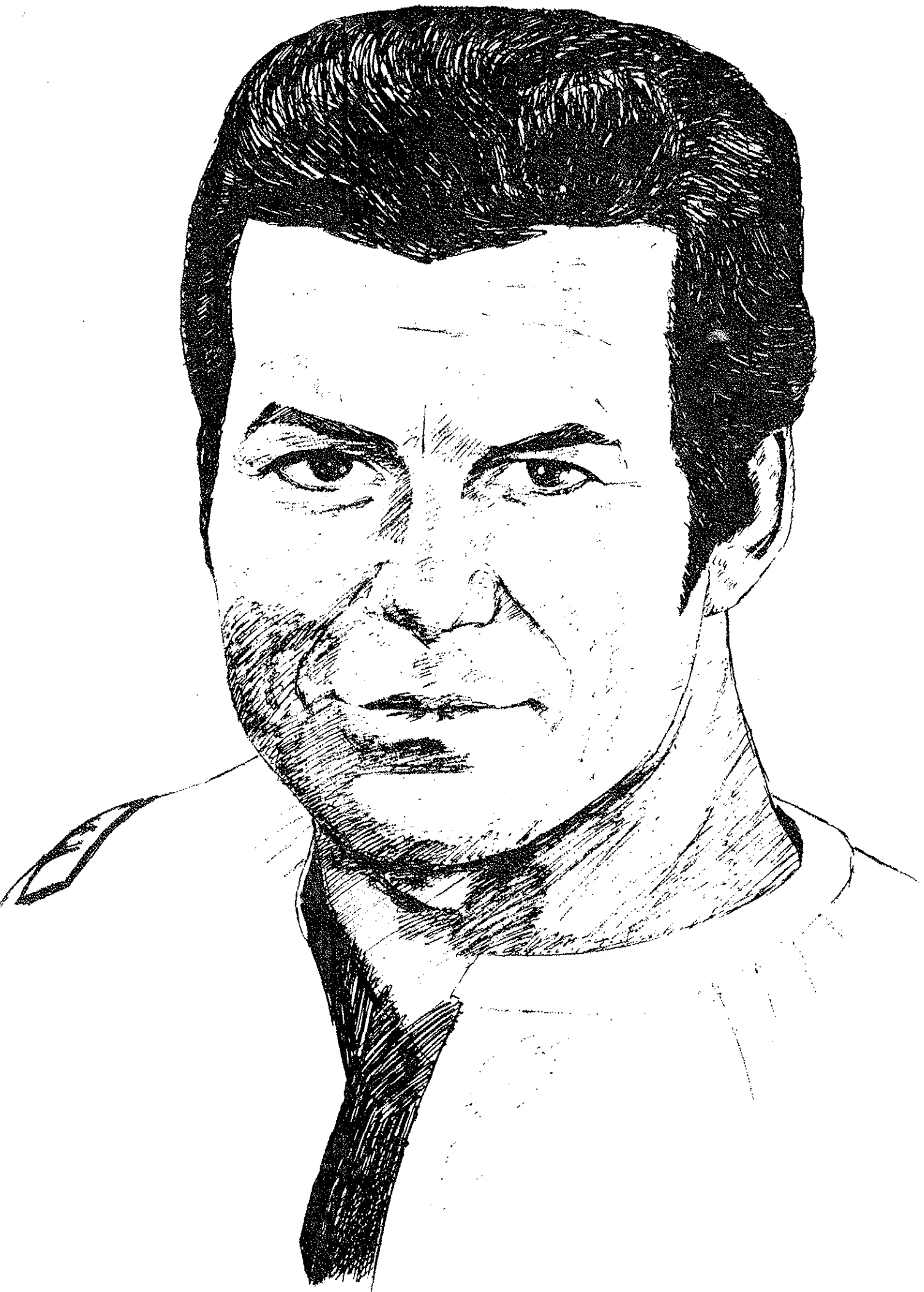
At the moment, due to work commitments, it seems unlikely that we will be able to go to Empathicon, but we intend to be at Sol III, and hope to see many of you there.

April 1983

Submissions of fiction, poetry or artwork are always welcome for ScoTpress zines, and should be sent to

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STARS AND LOSERS
 by
 Geraldine Griffin

"Jim, you've got to admit it has a lot of advantages." Leonard McCoy's slightly inebriated voice drifted through the empty corridors. "It has as much glamour as a Starship, maybe a little more, without the awesome responsibilities." Not even the transporter journey had been sufficient to dampen the doctor's buoyant spirits. Perhaps the rare chance to sample real Earth-produced champagne could account for his lightness of heart. It certainly did explain why his commanding officer, James T. Kirk, was finding it necessary to guide his footsteps through the ship's deck 5 towards his quarters. But 'Bones' own diagnosis was that his euphoria was as much due to being somewhere other than the Enterprise for a few hours as it was to the liberal amount of wine he had consumed during the evening.

"You would be a natural, Jim, all that charm. Here you are, wasting it on Andorian ambassadors; now on a liner like the Orion..." He paused to look at the Captain, who had been very quiet since the beam over. "You all right, Jim?"

"Sure, Bones - it's just that I find four hours of non-stop social chatter as exhausting as being confronted by a bunch of irate Klingons." The doctor looked upset at this, but the Captain continued. "I did enjoy the evening, Bones. It was just what the doctor ordered."

Yes, thought McCoy to himself. You did need a break. It's been a long mission. Tonight had made him realise just how stretched they had all been. Soon they must have some proper R & R. He made a mental note to speak to Jim about it tomorrow. Right now his thoughts were on that bottle of brandy and prolonging this pleasant diversion. But that was not to be. Kirk could see the doctor was settling down to a lengthy trip through Memory Lane.

"I'll say goodnight, Bones," he said softly as he keyed open the door to the doctor's cabin.

"Jim, you're not going without a nightcap to settle that champagne?" The voice sounded hurt.

"Doctor, in three hours I've got to be fit to take command of this vessel. Now, if you don't mind a bumpy ride..."

The doctor was torn. Professionalism won. "Of course, you're right, Jim." He turned into his cabin, only to turn hastily. "Jim, make sure you get that full three hours' sleep. I've been noticing a fall-off in your efficiency ratings recently."

"Goodnight, Doctor," came the Captain's firm reply, echoing down the silent corridor. He was already at the door of his own quarters. Sleep, however, was far from the mind of James Kirk.

That he had enjoyed his visit to the interstellar liner was perfectly true. The welcome invitation had fulfilled its promise in every way. The dinner and the wine had been excellent and the company and conversation stimulating. He had especially enjoyed the prestige and place of honour that his reputation had earned him. But he also knew that the visit had left him with a sense of unease usually foreign to his nature.

Unexpectedly, he had been faced with an issue that had been nagging at him for some time. It could no longer be put aside. Now he needed these few hours to think it through. He'd make it up to Bones another time.

As he stretched out on the bed he allowed the hum and vibration of the great ship to ease the tension in his body and mind. He had received the standard status report in the transporter room - but he did not need that to know that all was well with his beautiful silver lady.

His - but for how long? There had been times in the past five years when

the rest of his life had seemed unreal. What was it like before the Enterprise? What would it be like after her? It had to come. For some time now there had been rumours on the Starfleet grapevine of honours to come, "...a chance to express our appreciation..."

All very vague - until this evening. A rather pompous diplomat had been seated to Kirk's left at dinner. Over the port, the conversation had turned to the vital role the starship captain played in the Federation 'infrastructure'.

The diplomat had gone on at embarrassing length about the shining example Kirk and the Enterprise had been to the Federation. He finished by proposing a toast to "Admiral Kirk of the very near future, who would no doubt continue his valuable work at the very heart of Starfleet."

Kirk had managed a gracious smile, but he had been shaken to a degree he rarely experienced. The diplomat was conceited, but no fool. He had a reliable source close to the top in Starfleet. Otherwise he would never have committed himself so in such a company.

For the first time that evening, the Captain was glad that Spock and McCoy had been seated at different tables from himself. They had seen him play a part before...and he had a feeling that his performance was not succeeding entirely even with these strangers. He was rescued from his confusion by his host's timely suggestion that a tour of the Star liner's bridge should be included in the evening. Together, he and Captain Butler left behind the sparkling company and began the long journey through the liner's carpeted grandeur to its command centre.

Jim Kirk was silent, only partly aware that his companion was being diplomatically reassuring. "I find I seldom even think of Starfleet now," Captain Butler confided. He had recognised the symptoms. Looking at Kirk tonight was like seeing himself ten years earlier. He had never made the captaincy of a Starship, but First Officer had not been so different. "This is a good life," he continued. "Undemanding, sometimes tedious. But I have a deck below my feet, and there are the stars." As Butler talked on they both stood watching the magnificent liner stretch out before them into the distance. Kirk saw only his own demanding mistress.

During the few minutes that Captain Butler was diverted from his guest to attend to some routine reports, Kirk forced himself to collect his thoughts into some reasonable attempt at order. By the time the two men reached the main salon once more, the Captain of the Enterprise was able to thank Butler with sincerity and to compliment him on his ship.

Now, as James Kirk lay watching the starfield shimmer and change on his view-screen he felt desperation once more. The worst part of the problem was that he had very little control over what was about to happen.

He had known for some time that his ability to act independently was a characteristic that had accounted for much of his success. Yet he would have as little say in the change of course his life would now take as any Academy-fresh Ensign awaiting his first posting. The situation was very simple. Starfleet had a quick turnover in Starship Captains. Those who managed to survive the strain for five or six years were usually only too willing to be kicked upstairs. It was more common-sense than psychology. The Human mechanism operated efficiently only within specific parameters. When stretched beyond these limits you became a liability. The stakes were too high to risk prolonging the careers of even the most competent officers.

He could think of several of his contemporaries who had visibly aged twenty years in the course of five. Was he so different? Perhaps it had happened to him and he was too blind to notice.

He had changed. It was not possible to spend five years out there, in command, and not be changed. Despite his years of experience he was not as sure of himself or the universe as he had been the first day he had worn the gold of command on the bridge of the Enterprise. The edges had blurred; he was no longer certain where his life was leading. He knew he was tired.

Recently, he had been irritable at times, especially with the newer, inexperienced crew members. Routine had become more important to him. He was annoyed to find a familiar face missing. Here he was proving the theory, he could offer all the symptoms.

He knew enough about Starfleet procedure to imagine the next step they would take. The Enterprise was due in drydock shortly for fairly major repairs; it would be the perfect moment for Nogura to act. There would be the fanfare of decorations and receptions. All grist to the publicity mill, especially significant with appropriations in the offing.

When all the fuss was over, where would he be left? There was always interesting, important work in an organisation like Starfleet. He had often suffered at the hands of the infamous Starfleet bureaucracy - here was his chance to do something active about it. After all, it had achieved the remarkable feat of irritating Spock!

Spock. Kirk now knew what it was he had been subconsciously avoiding. A way of life, a ship, their loss would hurt for a long time. But he could cope with that; indeed, if he was totally honest with himself, his ambition would not let him regret their loss. But the loss of his hard-won Vulcan friend was another matter. Every fibre of his existence rebelled against the thought.

Kirk was on his feet before the second wail of the red alert sounded. He switched on the viewer. "What have we got, Spock?" he asked, knowing instinctively that the Vulcan was on the bridge.

"Sir, a life pod has been released from the Orion. Its speed now exceeds Warp 5 and is increasing. Ship/pod telemetry suggests this is an unauthorised launch. Sensors indicate three life forms aboard, humanoid."

The Captain was puzzled. "Explain the red alert."

"The pod's heading is 273 mark 4," came the reply.

"On my way. Kirk out."

The bridge was calm but with an atmosphere that said the people who worked there could cope with anything. They might have to unless the pod could be diverted. Everything was as Kirk anticipated. From early in his command he had fostered this response from his bridge crew. It worked. In the seconds it took him to cross to the centre seat he wondered how the next Captain would expect his crew to react in a situation like this one.

"Report, Spock," he said after a momentary hesitation.

"The pod's course is unchanged. Its speed now exceeds Warp 7. If these factors remain stable, at maximum warp we will intercept it some fifteen parsecs inside Romulan space, sir."

"What about tractor beams?" Kirk asked hopefully.

"Of little use, Captain. The vehicle is outside tractor range," Spock answered from the science section.

"Agreed, sir," came from Commander Scott, who had been called to the bridge for the duration of the red alert.

Kirk swung his chair round to face the communications officer. "Uhura, get me Captain Butler on the Orion, then try to raise the pod. I'm still hoping to hear a reasonable explanation." As Uhura turned back to her board, he added, "Put sickbay on standby - and prepare yourself; I don't think the doctor's going to like it."

She smiled her understanding. Already she had fulfilled the first order. "Captain Butler on audio, *r - interference on visual."

"Kirk here, Captain Butler. What is your status?"

"A life pod with warp capability has been launched without command sanction."

It is not a malfunction. There are, as I'm sure you know, three persons aboard. Communications are operative; they are either ignoring our signals or are unable to respond. My crew are checking 'bodies' against passenger manifests now. We should have identifications verified shortly. Do you wish me to come about on an intercept course?"

"Negative, Captain," Kirk replied. "We are pursuing and where we are going, the Enterprise may already be one Federation vessel too many."

Uhura had finally managed to obtain a visual transmission from the Orion and her Captain's face appeared on the main viewscreen. "You know, Captain Kirk, we have occasionally had this kind of problem to deal with before, after an enjoyable social function. Some of the young passengers become a little...high-spirited, and feel like a joy-ride. I'm sure the situation can be corrected."

"Let us hope so, Captain. Hold your position and let me have that information as soon as it's available," Kirk said as he turned once more to the communications officer. "Lieutenant, contact Starfleet, priority one channel. Inform them of what has occurred. Update as and when necessary."

"Aye, sir."

"Gentlemen," Kirk addressed the bridge in general, "we are not going to carry this one alone. This is a matter for the Council. Mr. Sulu, how long to intercept point?"

The helmsman checked the readings. "Five hours and forty three minutes, sir."

"Mr. Scott, is there any possibility...?" he asked hopefully, already knowing the reply.

"I could get out and push, sir, but short of that possibility..." came the aggrieved reply.

"I appreciate the offer, Scotty," Kirk said with sincerity. "Are they within transporter range?"

"Not at present, sir," the engineer replied. "But they will come within range well before I.P. is reached."

A ray of hope dawned, only to be dashed by Spock. "Sir, calculating the minor fluctuations in their course and the speed at which they are travelling, I would estimate the odds against a successful transportation to be twenty-five to one."

"That makes the transporter our last resort, then, Spock. In case it becomes necessary, you'd better keep the transporter locked on to their position as closely as the sensors can manage." He spoke again to Uhura. "Any luck with the pod?"

"Negative, sir. They may be incapacitated, but I consider it more likely that they are ignoring our messages."

"Explain, Lieutenant." Kirk had learned that he could depend on this officer's judgement and perception.

"I'm picking up a lot of interference bursts like the one that caused the problem with the Orion visual. It sounds as if someone is taking the pod's communications board apart and putting it together again."

"Confirmed, sir." Spock's frequent use of the word 'sir' in the past few minutes was beginning to irritate Kirk. What was wrong with him? The Vulcan continued to ignore Kirk's puzzled look.

"Sensors indicate movement within the pod and the diverting of a small amount of warp power into the communications panel. Calculations show that this drain, minimal though it is, will hasten I.P. and that will now occur within the demilitarized zone."

"Well, that's an improvement," Kirk said, swinging the centre seat to bring himself face to face with the science officer. "The Fates would seem to be with us, Spock."

Not rising to the bait, Spock simply acknowledged the comment with a curt, "Sir!"

If he says that one more time... thought Kirk savagely as the turbolift decanted a grumpy McCoy. "Well, Captain, where are all the casualties?"

Kirk thought it was going to be one of those days. "Bones, there's a possibility that the pod occupants needed medical attention, but we're pretty sure now that they are just being awkward." Looking at the doctor's sour expression, he went on. "Why, are you disappointed?" He immediately regretted it. The doctor was already retracing his steps towards the lift.

"Wait, Bones." His tone was apologetic. "I'll come with you. I could use a cup of coffee and an aspirin. Who was it said champagne doesn't give you a hangover?"

The doctor relented, knowing exactly what the Captain meant.

"Spock, you have the con. Inform all senior officers I want full reports in the briefing room in twenty minutes."

"Yes, sir."

With a long backward look at his First Officer, Kirk left the bridge.

One by one the Enterprise senior officers handed over to their deputies and made their way to the briefing room. Last to enter was Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott. Kirk studiously ignored his worried expression as he called the briefing to order. Turning to the calm figure on his right, he spoke. "Mr. Spock, will you bring us up to date?"

"Sir, the pod's course is unchanged. The occupants have made no attempt to communicate. Sensor sweeps show they must have completed the alterations to the pod's communications board. They now appear to be resting. The pod's course and speed remain stable. The minor fluctuations in direction continue, and I believe this feature has been built into their navigation programme to prevent the use of the transporter in their apprehension. Starfleet have signalled that they are monitoring the situation. They have also contacted the Romulan Council seeking permission to enter their space in 'hot pursuit', should it become necessary. The request was received without comment by the Romulan representative. The President of the Federation Council has requested that members stand by should an emergency meeting be deemed necessary. Finally, Captain Butler reports that they have now accounted for all their listed passengers, so it would seem likely that the persons in question are stowaways. That concludes all new information to the present moment, sir."

Kirk paused momentarily to allow everyone to assimilate the facts in Spock's concise report. They had all become used to handling the volume of information the Vulcan was capable of providing on apparently any subject at a moment's notice just as Spock had learned to present the required information so that his Human colleagues were not swamped or confused.

"Thank you, Spock." He turned to the communications officer. "Your report, Lieutenant."

"There's little new to report, Captain. The pod is continuing to ignore our signals on all frequencies and in all languages, including linguacode. However, I have been re-running the tapes I made at the time they were modifying communications. This is largely speculation, sir, but I think it is likely that they were effectively increasing the system's range. The tapes also suggest that the people working have an excellent understanding of the theory, but very little practical experience."

"That's very interesting, Lieutenant. Good work." Uhura took the Captain's compliment in her stride.

"Captain, if the figures Uhura has given me are correct, with the power these people have on tap from the warp engines, they'll have the capability to

broadcast clear across the Galaxy," commented Mr. Scott.

"Well, in that case, Mr. Scott," said the doctor, "they must have something important to tell us."

"I believe I may know what it is, Doctor."

Seven pairs of eyes turned sharply towards the speaker. "Spock, are you hazarding a guess?" McCoy was intrigued. Spock had pulled some whoppers out of thin air before, but surely there could be a hundred scenarios to fit these facts.

"As you know, Doctor, I do not guess. I make logical assumptions from known facts." His voice was flat, with no hint of the lighter tone in which he usually carried on these exchanges with the Doctor.

"O.K., Spock, you have the floor." Kirk was now convinced that there was something wrong with the Vulcan - it was not his imagination. The First Officer became the focus of attention in the quiet briefing room, but before he could begin, the bridge intercom sounded, and as Uhura flicked on the switch, Sulu's face appeared on the viewscreen.

"There's an incoming call from Starfleet Command, sir - Admiral Lewis," the helmsman reported.

"Pipe it down here, Mr. Sulu." So, thought Kirk, this one is getting the brass out of bed! Lewis was on the Starfleet Policy Committee.

"Captain Kirk, Lewis here. I wanted you to know we're right on top of the situation here at Command. We appreciate fully the delicacy of your position, and we feel the management of this matter could not be in better hands. We have every confidence that you will resolve the problem before it can cause repercussions within the present political climate. If possible the pod must be retrieved before Romulan space is violated. Should this prove impossible, the best solution for all concerned, not least those foolish enough to undertake this mad venture, would be a policy of containment. The pod must be stopped. I trust you follow me, Captain?" the Admiral finished.

"Sir," said Kirk, unable to keep the edge out of his voice, "I think you can safely say I get the message." He could hear sympathetic murmurings around him, led by McCoy.

"Good, Captain, good," said the Admiral. "Lewis out." Uhura cut the transmission. Wanting to chase away the shadows of political expediency that suddenly crowded the room, Kirk turned to Spock.

"Mr. Spock, if you will be so kind, you have something to tell us."

"Indeed, sir. The life forms aboard the pod are carbon-based. Sensors cannot be more specific about their point of origin; but they are not Romulans making a run for the border. They are highly intelligent as the planning and execution of their enterprise indicates; their sense of purpose is obvious. I believe they must have co-conspirators aboard the Orion. To stow away aboard such a ship is virtually impossible without assistance. Decontamination checks are too rigorous to avoid unaided - most likely it was a crew member. I have checked the Orion's schedule over the past solar month. Her last port of call was Altarra. I believe they began their journey there; to have eluded detection for longer would be impossible." He paused.

"Altarra," said the Captain. "That's been cropping up a lot recently in Intelligence reports."

"With cause, Captain. The situation is very complex but it seems likely the Romulans have infiltrated the planet." Spock ignored the shock this announcement caused. He continued, "I think it likely that they intend to act shortly to seize control of the entire system."

"Altarra," gasped the Doctor. "The Romulans in Altarra - that's incredible. What about their withdrawal behind their own borders? How could such a thing happen?"

Kirk too was puzzled. "Intelligence reports an increasing traffic between the Altarran system and the Romulan zone, despite the supposedly sealed borders, but they are unaware of anything like this. What's the source of your information, Spock?"

"Sir, for many years Vulcan has maintained close links with Altarra. There are many similarities between our cultures and philosophies. Altarra is totally dedicated to the ways of peace. The Altarrans have refused to align themselves with any power block. They maintain an open planet policy, welcoming all who care to visit. For this, they are greatly respected on Vulcan."

"Not only on Vulcan," said McCoy. "Throughout the Galaxy. The Altarran model of social evolution is regarded as a shining light. To say nothing of their achievements in the Arts and Sciences."

"Agreed, Doctor. The Altarrans have struggled hard to achieve a perfectly balanced society. For some time now they have been actively pursuing policies to aid other races to succeed as they have done."

"Enter the Romulans," said Scott, "and somehow I don't think it's Altarran art they're after."

"You are quite correct, Mr. Scott," replied Spock as he instructed the computer to display a schematic of the Altarran system. "Altarra is the fourth planet of seven. They are all rich in minerals, and four are suitable for Human life. Altarra is a jewel just outside the Romulan sphere of influence."

"But surely the Altarrans know well enough by now what the Romulans are like," Kirk asked impatiently.

"Altarra, sir, has achieved what it has because its people were prepared to sacrifice all in their pursuit of stability. They have determined that their policies must be extended to the galactic stage. If they are not willing to make an attempt at bringing this about with a race like the Romulans, their neighbours, they feel they cannot expect others to try. Besides, their personal success has made them optimistic by nature. Indeed, they were initially successful. The Romulans reacted favourably despite all the forecasts to Altarra's friendly overtures. You may recall the cultural and trade treaties that were signed over two solar years ago."

"Getting their foot in the door," muttered McCoy.

"It would seem, however," continued Spock, "that recently the Altarrans have begun to lose control of the situation. The Romulans began to take advantage. They have even begun accompanying their trading vessels with warships. Short of asking the Federation for assistance, and thereby bringing about the conflict they so badly want to avoid, they have no redress. They are not capable of acting on their own behalf. They abandoned their military technology centuries ago."

Uhura spoke. "Mr. Spock, sooner or later they are going to have to ask for help. In fact, isn't the pod incident a request in itself?"

"Lieutenant, it is very difficult to give up one's ideals, even harder to admit defeat."

The security chief spoke for the first time. "Another thing the Altarrans don't admit is that they achieved so much because although they refuse to join the Federation, their position on our borders has guaranteed their security from aggressors like the Romulans. Until, that is, they start handing out invitations."

Spock did not respond. There was a lull in the conversation while they all pondered what had been said.

"What I don't understand is Starfleet's obvious desire to hush this thing up," said McCoy. "They should be beating on the Council's door right now, demanding to be allowed to take action."

Kirk explained. "Doctor, as far as I am aware, Altarra has made no formal request for aid, and if Spock is right, it's unlikely that they will. Starfleet

or the Council cannot go charging into unaligned space to right wrongs, no matter what the provocation. If Miss Uhura is correct, and this pod incident is an appeal for help, I would doubt that it is coming from any official body."

"Yes, sir," agreed the First Officer. "At this moment the last thing the Council wants is a major galactic crisis. The U.F.P. is at its best an uneasy mixture of disparate races. Its unity below the surface is tenuous."

"Spock, where does Vulcan stand on this issue?" asked the Captain.

"Vulcan is deeply concerned for the fate of Altarra. The High Council has as yet decided no policy. But it is known that the Altarran approach, despite this set-back, has much support."

"What?" The Doctor found this incredible. "I thought the Vulcans were supposed to be realists."

"We are, Doctor. We also believe in the ways of peace. The galaxy would be devastated now were it not for the Organians. Surely it's time we outgrew our dependence on them. This policy is a possible method of achieving it."

"Unfortunately, Spock," commented the Captain, "the Romulans don't have policies, only interests - their own."

"You don't support that policy, do you, Spock? You've had dealings with the Romulans - do you really think it can work?"

"My opinions on the matter are irrelevant, Doctor. The decision will be taken by the High Council."

"The High Council. I was afraid of that. Some of them appear to be capable of ignoring the 'Big Bang'."

"Just as some Humans would seem to be capable of causing it."

The briefing room temperature abruptly dropped several degrees with Spock's retort. This wasn't the usual banter; this was in earnest. Between the Doctor and Spock opened up the gulf that separated Human and Vulcan culture. The Doctor remained silent, afraid that hasty words now might destroy something that had become very important to him. It was the Captain who eventually ended the icy silence.

"Fortunately, gentlemen, it's not up to us to resolve the galaxy's moral dilemmas. What concerns us is the pod and the three lives it carries. I wouldn't like to speculate on their chances of survival in Romulan space." He paused, looking at Spock, who was avoiding his gaze. "Senior staff will get a couple of hours sleep before I.P.; I want one hundred percent efficiency. Dismissed, gentlemen."

Kirk was determined to have this out with Spock now. The Vulcan always waited until the Captain was ready to leave before he moved, so Kirk hung back to provide the opportunity for a quiet private talk. Tonight, the First Officer was the first to leave the room.

Consumed with worry, Kirk headed for his own quarters, having to pass, on the way, his First Officer's cabin. He halted at Spock's door uncertainly, then passed on. Whatever the problem was, it would keep until after the pod was secured. He reasoned that the relief in tension this would bring about would help him deal with Spock. Besides, it was time he trusted his Vulcan friend to take the lead in handling their relationship. He hoped it would not take Spock long to break through his reserve and discuss what was bothering him. Every second that this wall existed round Spock increased the anguish it caused the Human.

After two hours of enforced relaxation, Kirk showered and dressed. He went straight to the bridge, because Uhura was sure the pod was receiving signals. He would try reasoning with the three occupants. He'd be happy if they gave him an argument. Their silence was infuriating. As he entered the bridge a squeal of

static assaulted his ears. He looked sharply at the relief communications officer.

"It's coming from the pod, sir," the young man assured him. "I think they are getting ready to broadcast."

"At last," said the Captain as he sat down. "Let's head what they have to say - and call Mr. Spock to the bridge."

"Aye, sir." The relief officer threw some switches as he said, "There's a visual as well, sir, I'm putting it on the main screen."

Three tense young faces replaced the starfield on the viewer directly ahead of Kirk. Two young men and a girl. One of the men and the girl were obviously brother and sister. A little nervously at first, but rapidly growing in confidence, they began to explain their actions in terms remarkably similar to those Spock had used a short time before in the briefing room. They concluded by declaring that they longed for a true peace between all the life forms of the galaxy, but that they were prepared to risk that peace to save Altarra from being overrun by another race. They realised the illegality of their entry into Romulan space, understood that it might well bring about the bloodshed that they deplored but were prepared to see because the price of avoiding it - their planet and people - was too great for them to accept. Their final words indicated that they expected to die for it.

Not if I can help it, thought Kirk as he turned to watch Spock enter the bridge. "You've heard their story?" he said.

"Yes, sir. The brother and sister are Rono and Margetta Emmi, the children of the Altarran Council Leader."

Uhura stepped from the lift as the Captain raised his eyes ceilingward. "Perfect!" he muttered. "Lieutenant, get me Starfleet Command."

"Captain Lewis is already on Channel One."

"Switch him through, Lieutenant," he requested, gathering his thoughts.

"Kirk, we're not going to be able to sweep this under the carpet as I'd hoped." The Admiral's voice was pitched very low, like that of a person with something to hide. "We want to stay out of it, but they are in a Federation vessel entering the Romulan Zone from our space. No doubt that is a key feature of their plan. The Romulans have finally responded to our request. They state that they are in Altarran space as agreed by treaty with that planet's government. But that same treaty does not allow for Altarran or Federation entry into their space. Should this occur, they will be forced to take stern measures to ensure their security and - I quote - 'however severe these measures might be'." He crumpled up the print-out and threw it away. "Kirk, that pod must not enter their space." He bowed his head. "If violation is unavoidable, you know what must be done." He looked up into the Starship Captain's face and its expression could only give him an impression of the anger Kirk felt.

"Admiral Lewis, the critical nature of this problem is not lost on me, and you can be sure that I do not anticipate having to sink to Klingon tactics to resolve it." He looked at Scott who confirmed his calculations by giving Kirk a nod and then continued in an authoritative tone. "My Chief Engineer and Science Officer are programming a manoeuvre that will allow the Enterprise to pick up the pod's occupants, possibly also the craft, by tractor beam within the demilitarized zone. Romulan territory will not be violated."

The Admiral chose to ignore the curtness of Kirk's voice as he spoke again. "The Federation Council is preparing to meet, even though the Vulcan representative has been withdrawn." Kirk looked across to Spock, who did not lift his head from the viewer. "And the Altarran leader has repudiated the three Altarrans in the pod. He is signalling them to abandon this action."

"I don't think that will help, somehow, Admiral," Kirk said as he thought of the young faces.

"Keep us up to date on developments, Captain. Lewis out." The transmission

ended and the viewscreen was once again filled with the recorded message the three had made. It was being repeated over and over; they had planned well.

Kirk got up from the centre seat and went to lean against the railing of the science station. "Spock," he said quietly. The Vulcan straightened, keeping his back to the Captain. "I need to talk to you, Spock." The First Officer faced him with an expression on his face that Kirk had hoped never to see again. Something had hurt his friend very badly. He cast about wildly in his mind to think of what it could be. He knew Spock was deeply worried about Altarra. But this was something that went much deeper.

"Jim..." The Vulcan's features softened. "I..."

"Captain!" Uhura's untimely interruption was to report that the pod was signalling that they wished to speak to him personally. Reluctantly, Kirk turned away from Spock.

"This is Kirk, commanding the U.S.S. Enterprise. I am honoured to be granted the privilege of speaking to you at last." He was angry.

"Captain, I'm sorry you have become drawn into this. We had not anticipated your presence in our plan. I ask you now to avoid any possible risk to your crew or your ship by breaking off your pursuit."

"Rono?" The Captain's voice had mellowed and the young man nodded in response to his name. "You must realise that I am duty bound to save you from the consequences of your action, just I must prevent the galactic crisis it would trigger."

"Captain Kirk, thank you for your concern, but I can't allow you to stop us. The crisis that will occur is exactly what we hoped to achieve. This has been forced upon us by others. I suggest you try your reasoning on them, as we have done. And failed. We are committed, therefore further discussion is unnecessary. I ask you again to let us continue alone."

"I can't do that, Rono. I will retrieve the pod should I have to enter Romulan space to do it. Do you know what that will mean?" Kirk asked.

"I do, Captain. I know very well." With these words the transmission was cut and the pod reverted to broadcasting their recorded statement.

McCoy's voice came from behind Kirk. "Jim, I don't like the sound of that."

"I too am uneasy, Doctor," Spock agreed.

Kirk spoke to the helmsman. "Sulu, put visual on the pod on the main screen, magnification six." Sulu complied, and a faint speck on the screen amidst the myriad stars was all that could be glimpsed of the tiny craft.

"Transporter room to standby." Kirk turned to Spock. "I think this is a job for you, Spock; we may have to go for those odds after all."

The Vulcan did not get as far as the lift before Sulu's astounded cry filled the bridge. "Captain!" Sulu looked up at the screen. "They're pulling away from us...now at Warp 12 and increasing."

"That's impossible. Spock?" He moved to stand at the science station to which the Vulcan had returned.

"Confirmed, Captain. Communications weren't the only system they were modifying. They are achieving this by allowing the engines to go critical. Now at Warp 15.4. If they don't disengage the anti-matter drive within three point seven six minutes, they will die."

The craft had disappeared immediately from the screen and Kirk knew that within seconds of throwing the switch they had left transporter range. He knew voice contact was all that was left, but as he looked at Uhura, she shook her head. "They've destroyed the receiver, Captain; only the transmitter is functioning." Again the recorded message appeared on the screen. "I'm sorry, Captain..." Her voice trailed away.

Kirk's horror was mirrored in every face on the bridge. He heard himself

say, "What have I done?"

In the pod, three figures, huddled on the floor, held each other. They were silent. Their thoughts were of a shining blue planet and the people they loved.

The bridge of the great starship was also silent except for the whir and tick of its intricate machinery. For all its might and subtlty the people aboard it were helpless at that moment.

The abrupt ending of the recorded message was all that marked the passing of three lives. Without a word the Captain walked to the turbolift.

"Captain." Spock had moved to follow him. "They were determined upon this outcome. You could not have anticipated..." His words were lost to the Captain as the lift doors swished closed. After a few moments the Doctor also left the bridge; he was going to sickbay for a good stiff drink and to hell with regulations. Behind him, the Vulcan's expression was already back to normal.

"Navigator, lay in a course to take us back to the Orion."

"Laid in, sir," came the prompt reply.

"Mr. Sulu, execute the course, Warp 4." Then to Uhura, "Lieutenant, inform Starfleet Command of what has occurred."

"Aye, Mr. Spock." Her voice was sad.

As the powerful engines decelerated, the mighty starship swung round to its new course. The First Officer stood behind the centre seat watching the stars take on the more familiar patterns of Federation space.

Spock was deeply troubled. Within the past twelve hours the foundation on which his whole life rested had foundered. It had happened during the dinner on the Orion. The evening he had found to be very pleasant; enjoyable was how he would freely admit to describing it. He particularly enjoyed watching Jim being given the place of honour that was his due. He had been able to treat the dinner guests with whom he was seated with a patience that bordered on indulgence. Curiosity was a characteristic that could be attributed not only to Humans. The various races represented at the table took full advantage of the opportunity to question the Vulcan who was much more open and at ease in their company than they had expected.

Then everything had changed. He was seated close to one of the Starline's top executives. "Mr. Spock, having had the privilege of working closely with Vulcans in the past --" now Spock knew how the seating arrangements had been decided -- "I know you must expect a high standard from your Captain."

The Vulcan nodded gravely. "Captain Kirk is an excellent Starship Commander."

"Yes, by all accounts he's exactly the type of officer my company would like to recruit. We offer many inducements but I doubt our ability to tempt him away into the ranks of the merchant service. From what I hear he will be offered the post of Chief of Operations when Clemenceau retires at the end of the year. He's exactly what Starfleet needs. He'll shake them up, don't you agree?" He looked directly at Spock.

In a perfectly level voice Spock said, "The Captain would be a great asset to Starfleet as Chief of Operations."

"It would be Admiral Kirk then, of course. Chasing around the galaxy is all very fine but there comes a time when a man needs to settle somewhere. Even a career man like Kirk."

Spock had been watching Kirk intently. Yes, he fitted in perfectly with a company like this. He was revelling in it. The shape of the future loomed up before Spock. On a different level of consciousness he was aware the executive was hinting that he was next in line for command of the Enterprise.

"Vulcans," he said, "must be given more opportunities for command." It was

a matter of total insignificance to this particular Vulcan. As soon as he had been able, he excused himself and returned to the Enterprise, leaving behind a rather confused Human who wondered what he had said to offend.

In the solitude of his quarters, lit only by the flickering meditation lamp, coldly and, he hoped, logically he took stock. Relationships do not remain stable, even on Vulcan. What was to come was simply a natural progression. He had always known it would be so. He had been wrong to become so dependent on this Human, though he could not bring himself to regret it. Nor could he quell the illogical reaction of being hurt. He experienced an emotion he believed to be envy. Yes, he was envious of Jim. When the time came for parting, he knew his Human friend would feel sorrow, pain. But that would pass in time in a new and full life where he belonged. But what was he to do? He had gained so much from knowing Kirk, changed so that he could hardly recognise himself. That could not be undone easily, if at all. What have I become? Where do I belong? he thought.

Starfleet had no hold on him without his friend. The valuable work would continue, but it would be only routine to him, a daily list of activities to be worked through. He did not belong on Vulcan in his present state. Yet Vulcan was home. It was then that he first thought of Gol. It rose up like an island of peace in the storm of emotions that now battered him.

A life of compromise could not be his. Perhaps one of total logic was the answer for him. Kolinahr, nothing less. But at that moment as he prepared to begin his meditation he acknowledged the immense task its attainment would be. He was ashamed by his lack of control against the sorrow, anger and fear that now assaulted him. And he was so alone.

As his thoughts returned to the present, standing in the centre of the vital community that was the starship, the feeling of isolation was unbearable. He had determined that the break, when it came, would be total. That was the best way for Jim, the only way for himself. He refused to speculate on how long they would have, but he would not waste a second of it. He would begin now. Jim would be deeply grieved by the deaths of the Altarrans. He would go to him. As he was about to delegate authority to Sulu, Uhura called his name in the soft, quiet tone she reserved for him.

"Yes, Lieutenant," he answered.

"Sir, there is a personal communication coming in for you from Vulcan. It's Ambassador Sarek."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll take it in my quarters. Mr. Sulu, you have the con." The helmsman moved to sit in the centre seat.

Spock was grateful to hear the lift door closing behind him. He knew what was about to happen.

In his quarters, he played the taped message through twice before switching off the viewer. His thoughts lingered over its contents. It was not what his father had said, as how he had said it. Beneath the cold, almost off-hand tone, came an unspoken plea for help. Sarek was asking for Spock's help.

So there was to be no respite for him after all. He buzzed through to Uhura. "Lieutenant, do you have a location for the Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock, he's in sickbay - Dr. McCoy's office," came the efficient reply.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

It was perhaps for the best. Illogical to explain twice when once would suffice. Besides, he could not be sure of his control on a one-to-one basis with Jim Kirk now. The Doctor might be illogical, but paradoxically his presence would make formality easier. Before leaving his cabin he received a printout of the information he would require from the library computer, and reading it quickly, he set out for sickbay.

Dr. McCoy, Spock could see, had assumed his father confessor role. Kirk and

he both sat leaning on the office desk, glasses before them. Spock noted how drained the Captain looked. He had been deeply affected by the pod's destruction. Why, the Vulcan thought, must he take so much guilt upon himself? That his Human psyche could withstand it was a source of wonder to Spock. He found his resolve momentarily weakening; he wanted to ease Jim's burden, not add to it. Logic dictated that could not be. Proceed.

Both Humans were startled by his arrival. It was unlike him to enter a room so abruptly. Without preamble, he began. "Sir, I have received a communication from my father. He requires my presence on Vulcan. Having analysed his reasons I find myself in agreement with his wishes. I therefore make a formal request for leave, effective immediately."

They just stared at him. Spock began to wonder if they had misunderstood him. Perhaps he should rephrase?

"Spock..." Kirk had finally recovered his breath. He felt as if the sickbay had just depressurised for no apparent reason. "Do you think this is an appropriate time for leave? You're aware of all the reports coming in from all over the galaxy. All hell's going to break loose over this one. Your place is here. I'm sure your father's reasoning is excellent, but..."

"Captain, forgive me for interrupting, but it is precisely because of the crisis that I must return home. In the briefing, I explained Vulcan's deep involvement..." Kirk didn't hear the rest; absentmindedly he was thinking that he always thought Spock considered the Enterprise to be his home, as he did himself. He forced his mind to concentrate on what Spock was saying. "...In order to strengthen Sarek's position in Council it is essential that I withdraw from Starfleet." His eyes sought Kirk's understanding. "I doubt that Command will resist this request."

Silence descended and Kirk gazed distractedly into the middle distance. He was beginning to annoy McCoy. What was wrong with him? The Doctor had exercised phenomenal restraint during these last few minutes. He had held back, thinking it best to let Jim sooth these ruffled feathers. But he knew now something was badly wrong here. First off, why was Spock jumping when his father snapped his fingers? Lord knew he had ignored him for long enough. And more importantly, why was Jim, not known for his natural reserve, seeming to want to run for cover? Something had happened, and he had missed it.

Spock looked directly at the Captain. "Sir, I need your answer. The Orion will be secured and resuming her journey within the hour. There are several matters requiring my personal attention, and I..." He couldn't finish.

"But the Orion will delay you with her turn around at Antares, will she not?" Kirk asked rather shakily.

"I've checked her revised schedule. She is to divert immediately to Vulcan to facilitate the High Council. Apparently there is a large party of Altarran diplomats aboard. They were en route to Vulcan, and now it is essential that they reach their destination quickly."

"I see. That is most fortuitous, Spock." He knows it's over, thought Kirk at the same time. I must accept. "Kirk to bridge communications."

"Lt. Uhura, sir."

"Lieutenant, please advise the Orion to stand by to take a passenger aboard."

"Aye, sir," she replied. "Passenger's name and destination?"

"Commander Spock, Vulcan." Kirk's willpower meant he could say it. Stunned silence issued from the intercom. "Acknowledge, Lieutenant."

"...Acknowledged, sir."

Gathering the strength to switch off the intercom and stand up, Kirk looked into the face of his Vulcan friend. It told him nothing, yet the eyes seemed to will some message to him. He thought of the Vulcan as brother, yet here they stood like strangers. What had gone wrong?

Both were hurt. Spock felt rejected. Was the Human not even going to make a token protest? Even now, Jim Kirk, one word from you and I'll sacrifice my father, defy the Council, all Vulcan! He was not to know that Kirk's mind was in the same turmoil, that if he had tried to speak, he would have broken down.

As if in reply to his silent plea Kirk extended his hand. The Human gesture when friends part. Spock quickly stilled his mind. The Human was perceptive. Their hands grasped tightly; Kirk opened his mind - nothing. The shields in Spock's mind were built high and strong.

"I don't believe this is happening." They had forgotten McCoy was there. "Jim, are you going to let him go chasing half-way across the galaxy when he's needed here?" His gaze shifted to Spock. "And you, Spock - Vulcan got along nicely up to now without you, the Romulans won't go away because you're holding Daddy's hand."

"Bones," Kirk said quietly; one word, that was all, but it was enough. This was no time for one of McCoy's flights of outrage. His look was not lost on the Doctor. McCoy said no more. Kirk turned back to Spock.

"I'll meet you in the transporter room in thirty minutes."

"No, Captain. Your shift will have begun. I'll not detain you from your duties." He walked to the door; he paused, saying, "Goodbye, Jim."

"Goodbye, my friend," said the Captain to the closing door.

Spock dealt quickly with all the details he did not wish to leave unfinished. It took only a few minutes to pack his belongings. He was ready to go. Mercifully, he did not meet any of the people he had learned to think of as friends on his journey to the transporter room. He knew he could thank Jim Kirk for that. No-one could accuse him of being a sentimentalist but this was not the time for those goodbyes. Even the transporter officer was one of the newer crew members. He had been thrown a little by the Vulcan's entrance; like many others, he had never seen Spock dressed in anything but Science blue. Recovering himself he began for the fourth time to check on the transporter controls. He was in awe of Spock and was determined that his operation of the delicate machinery would be nothing short of perfect. His worry was in vain for Spock, usually so observant, was oblivious of his actions. He stood there for a long embarrassing moment until the young man felt compelled to speak. "Shall I energize, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, lieutenant. Energize."

The familiar room, so closely associated in his mind with homecomings, faded from view.

He materialised to see the Orion's Captain watching him. "Mr. Spock," said Butler. "Welcome aboard. I wish the circumstances could be different."

The Vulcan nodded in reply. The Captain indicated a door. "I'll take you to your cabin."

"Thank you." Spock bowed slightly and followed the Captain through the luxury of the liner. They walked in silence. After a quick tour of his suite, Butler left Spock alone and the Vulcan wasted no time in finding a starboard porthole. There, hanging in space above him, was the Enterprise, still beautiful despite five years of bruising missions. He watched her hungrily, absorbing every detail until the liner engaged warp drive and she was gone. For a long time he did not move.

Captain James T. Kirk was also in his cabin, alone. Unable to face the bridge he had altered the duty rota and escaped to the observation deck. As the liner left he said Spock's name, not softly. Then he had sought the solitude of his cabin. Now he sat there, preparing himself to face the reality of commanding a starship in a few hours.

On his answering the intercom summons, the voice of Lt. Sulu filled the room. "Captain, I thought you might like to know the Vulcan High Council has issued a directive to all Vulcan personnel in Starfleet. They are to cease their duties immediately and return to their home planet at the first opportunity."

"I see. Thank you, Lieutenant."

The helmsman could not know that he had only deepened the Captain's depression. He could have accepted Spock's leaving in these circumstances. But he had left under no orders, no compulsion other than a request from his father. Had he wanted to go?

Kirk looked at the chess board, noting the positions of the unfinished game. Slowly he carefully locked it away with his most precious belongings.

No matter how many unhappy childhood memories plagued him or how far he travelled, as Spock looked around him now he acknowledged that Vulcan was home. He took a deep breath of the warm sharp air and stood admiring how his people had come to terms with this harsh world. Living with it, not against it. Altering the landscape only as much as was essential. They had preserved the unique essence of what was Vulcan. Jim had once said it was lovely. Compared to other planets they had visited, Spock could not agree. But it was very grand, awe-inspiring. Its redness and mountainous features saw to that. So it remained unchanged, generation after generation; unlike so many others that had become wastelands, fit only to be abandoned.

As he walked the last few kilometers to his home, Spock prepared himself to greet his parents. At once, he recognised the familiar figure in the garden. He'd known she would be there, just as he had known his father would wait inside, allowing her that private moment to drop the pretence. He would not turn away from his mother this time.

"Spock, welcome." She extended her hand in the Vulcan manner; he ignored it and took her in his arms, aware of her surprise that quickly turned to delight. As they parted, he wiped away a stray tear, saying, "Illogical, as always, my mother."

"Your father's waiting in the study." It was the thing closest to her heart, to see them together again in the family home. They walked into the house together; only then did Spock notice the large furry body that followed his mother closely. He bent down to stroke the sehlat.

"His name is Denver," she said. Spock tried to think of a logical connection between a Terran continental city complex and a Vulcan sehlat, unsuccessfully. She continued, "He came to us when you left, Spock - we Human females need someone to fuss over, you know!"

He stopped. "Mother..." he began, but she silenced him.

"There is no need to say anything, Spock. I understood even then, though that did not make the parting any easier for me. I understand now why you return. I'm sorry it has to be like this. You were right all those years ago; it is your life. Never forget that. If you can't be happy, then be content." She stretched up to give him a quick kiss, then hurried off to the kitchen. The sehlat plodded after her.

Spock knocked softly on the door of the study. He remembered how, as a child, he had stood before this same door in wonderment. In the room which he now entered, he had embarked on that journey of learning, always new, always striving, that had become his life. Unchanged, filled with quiet, precious memories, standing within these walls, Spock felt the love he had for his father flood through him. Because of that love, he now stood, a perfect model of Vulcan emotional control, waiting for Sarek to complete the computer programme he had been working on since early morning.

As father and son they stood for a long moment in silence, until Sarek spoke. "Spock, my son, our house is filled, the family complete. Welcome."

"Greeting, father. May all journeys end in such fulfillment."

Sarek indicated that he should sit. There was much to say. He began, "You have studied the resume I have prepared on the diplomatic crisis?"

"Yes, father."

"Then you are aware of the gravity of the situation, and the delicate position I find myself in?" he asked.

"I was aware of that since your first communication. That is why I prepared to return even before the Council issued its directive." Spock's tone was neutral.

Sarek seemed at a loss for the right words, but long years in the diplomatic corps came to his rescue. "I have not spoken to you of this matter before, Spock, but I wish you to know that I appreciate how difficult that decision must have been for you. As a Vulcan I can understand the distress divided loyalties can cause."

Spock bowed his head in acknowledgement. This moment of silence between them banished for ever the years of silence that had been their loss. The moment passed, formality returned and Sarek continued. "Over the years I have spent much time analysing the galactic political structure. I have travelled widely in my role as Ambassador and I have been privileged to experience at first hand differing cultures and philosophies. Some of our people, despite the IDIC, would see these experiences as evidence of my contamination, especially considering the position I will take in this matter in Council. I intend to support the Federation Council view that the Romulans must be made to withdraw from Altarra. With a united Vulcan Council standing firm with the UFP I believe this can be achieved without bloodshed." His head lifted but his voice was without the arrogance that many associated with Vulcans. "Whatever the High Council decides, Vulcan will play the decisive role in this crisis. Your prompt return has greatly strengthened my hand." He used the Terran colloquialism quite naturally. "Of course, that does not mean that my opinion of Starfleet is changed. I find their methods questionable, often ill-considered, but their function is essential as the Altarran problem shows. Let us hope that it will not always be so." He paused. "Will my son stand by his father's side?"

"I shall be honoured to do so, sir; my thoughts are one with yours." It was good to be able to say that again.

"Then come, Spock. In the living room I'm sure we will find a lady exercising great patience."

They walked together, their conversation turning to a scientific paper that Spock had recently had published by the Academy.

Very little time had passed since the incident on the Romulan border yet already many interested parties had proclaimed the stance they would take. Vulcan was not one of these. The High Council had not even acknowledged that a crisis existed. They would remain silent until they had reached their decision. Now they observed, analysed and debated. Many other worlds within the Vulcan sway and far beyond were also silent, awaiting the Council's lead.

Vulcan's withdrawal from the UFP Council had left that body in something of a limbo. There was a great deal of discussion but few decisions other than to order Starfleet to monitor the Altarran system as closely as possible without entering its space. Starfleet had taken the Council at its word and was putting on an impressive display, deploying several starships in the region (of which the Enterprise was one) as 'observer' vessels.

Altarran space itself was peppered with Romulan ships of all classes. They matched every Federation vessel with one of their own. 'An old-fashioned stand-off' was how McCoy had described it. But apart from a great deal of reconnaissance not much was happening in either fleet. The powerful engines were silenced except

for the occasional border patrol, impulse power firing at intervals to maintain station-keeping. The only people who were busy were the sensor crews whose instruments constantly swept Altarran space to keep track of Romulan vessels.

The rest of the crew were in sombre, depressive state, reflecting the mood of their commanding officer. Kirk had spent much of the time since Spock's departure in his cabin or on the observation deck. He knew his crew; even the young replacement Science Officer could handle the current mission without his hovering over them. He longed to be sent on some exacting 'impossible' task - anything that would take him away from this blighted spot...

Bones did his best to help. Often he spent hours with the Captain, endlessly talking; but always the loneliness returned to Kirk, and the insane hope that the next time the intercom buzzed his response to it would bring Spock's voice. He knew he would get through this, but it was going to take every ounce of courage he possessed.

* * *

Spock too was calling on his reserves of will power. Life on Vulcan was very different from the one to which he was accustomed. Part of his mind was constantly calling out for that which was lost to him. It was a little easier knowing he was achieving more here on his home planet than he could have done on the Enterprise, whose orders he had been monitoring.

He had become deeply involved in his father's skilful political manoeuvring. He had been surprised to find that despite his Human inheritance and his years in Starfleet he could command a position of respect he had not expected. Using his reputation to the full he worked unceasingly and unobtrusively to strengthen Sarek's arguments on the Altarran question. Of course, he had no access to the High Council debates, but from the little information about them his father chose to volunteer he knew they were not going well. The greatest problem was Altarra itself. The Altarrans stubbornly refused to admit they had a problem, although they did not deny the charges made against the Romulans by the 'Orion Three'.

Their latest position was one of refusing to acknowledge the concerned enquiries from the rest of the galaxy. They presented the face of normality to all; life on Altarra proceeded exactly as it had done for centuries according to their telecasts, and trading and communications links with the outside.

The Romulans supported the facade by playing the wounded innocents to perfection. For facade was the only way it could be described. Bit by bit the Altarran people had watched their dream fall to pieces. Their culture, so at odds with that of the Romulans, could not stand the shock of direct contact with the alien presence. As their delicate social structure had declined the Romulans had willingly stepped in to provide an alternative.

They had not been pursuing a defined malicious plan, but being by nature a warrior race they had instinctively been driven to assert themselves. When they dealt with a population like that of Altarra the outcome was inevitable. Day by day their hold on the planet grew until they had control of every major function of government. Outwardly little changed as the calm Altarrans tried to carry on as before, hoping valiantly that their dedication alone would influence their now unwelcome guests, but by their acceptance of the passive role the Altarrans only served to entrench the Romulans more deeply, and within a short period of time the destiny of the Altarran system passed from its peoples and into the hands of the outsiders.

Of course, when the Romulans discovered they had Altarra firmly in their grasp it was too much for them to resist, and they acted quickly to consolidate their position. Salvation for Altarra would have to come from outside, for its people could not help themselves. Nor could they ask for help - having refused that option they found they now could not avail themselves of it. Their system was sealed off from the galaxy as effectively as if it had been moved behind the Romulan border itself.

For some time now the image of Altarra that was projected to all who cared to look was a perfect reflection of what it had always been. Perfect - except for one small crack that had shattered the illusion. The broadcast of the

'Orion Three'. That had been the proof of what many had feared.

Among the members of the High Council of Vulcan there was no disagreement about the facts. The bitterly waged dispute concerned how Vulcan would respond. The pressure group that presently held the greatest sway in Council believed that Altarra had made a conscious decision and that their right to do so had to be respected. Vulcan could not act unilaterally or with others to interfere in the affairs of an autonomous region.

As a result Sarek found himself in the difficult position of advocating not only such an action, but also the use of Starfleet to pressurise the Romulans into abandoning Altarra. Even for his skill and expertise in debate this stance was indefensible before the High Council.

It had become clear they would act only on a clear appeal for help from Altarra itself. The decision was taken, and the Council delegated two of its members to draw up a statement to that effect which would be delivered to the Federation Council.

On the day the Council had taken its decision Spock had been invited to lecture at the Science Academy. He was confronted on his return home by Amanda, who briefly described the events in Council.

"Your father is distressed," she said. "Please go to him, Spock."

Without delay the dutiful son went to the study door, and without seeking permission to enter, walked into the room. Sarek sat before the computer terminal; he held a piece of paper in his hand, on which Spock could see a few lines of well-proportioned Vulcan script.

"Father," he began, wondering how he could comfort his father without appearing to do so, "Mother has told me of the Council's decision."

"Yes, most distressing," Sarek replied off-handedly. He beckoned Spock to come closer, indicating the computer's display screen. "I should like your opinion on this, Spock."

The display was of a three-d chess board on which the game in play was well advanced.

"For a great many years I have been playing chess with Camden Thur, the Altarran Deputy for the Western City. We communicate the moves via the diplomatic bag. It has been a worthwhile experience. Thur is of Grand Master standard. His approach is constantly challenging, and often innovative."

He handed the paper to Spock, who read it quickly, then briefly studied the state of play.

"This move does not compute," he said shortly. "It shatters his defensive posture. It's an open invitation to..." The meaning became very clear.

"Precisely, Spock. It's not an appeal I can take officially to the Council, but I find it strangely eloquent. He cleared the display and walked to the centre of the room.

Spock remained silent, waiting for his father to speak. He was sure Sarek would have thought this through to its most logical conclusion.

* * *

Some days later Amanda watched her husband as he approached the house accompanied by someone she knew but couldn't quite place. She called into the study to tell Spock his father was returning and bringing a visitor, then she hurried out to the kitchen to prepare cool drinks, for she knew the guest was Human.

By the time she brought the tray into the living room she could hear Sarek's voice as he formally welcomed the guest to their home. There was no mistaking the answering voice, or the look on Spock's face as he went very pale. Amanda stepped out into the hall, hoping the delay would give her son the few seconds he needed.

"Captain Kirk! How delightful to see you - and so unexpectedly."

A little taken aback by her welcome Kirk nonetheless smiled warmly, and making the polite, usual reply, insisted that she call him by his given name. Then, looking past her, his features tightly controlled but with a voice that could not hide his pleasure, he said simply, "Spock!"

"Greetings, Jim, and welcome."

"Let's not stand in the hallway," Amanda fussed, ushering them all into the living room. Smoothly, while serving the drinks, she kept the conversation going until Spock said,

"I did not know the Enterprise had been diverted to Vulcan. Your orders must have been very sudden."

Jim Kirk's confusion showed clearly in his face. "But Spock..."

He was not allowed to complete the sentence. Sarek spoke. "I sent Captain Kirk a message requesting he come to Vulcan with all haste, alone."

"Sarek told me of your plan, Spock. I assumed you knew I was coming."

"You're not under orders, Captain?" Once more he was the First Officer of the Enterprise.

"No, as far as Command are concerned, I'm still on board the Enterprise," Kirk explained. "My absence should not be noticed unless something unforeseen occurs."

"Exactly what have you planned, Spock?" asked Amanda in a calm voice.

"It has become necessary that I journey to Altarra to collect evidence on the nature of the Romulan occupation," he replied.

"On what authority do you undertake this mission?" She looked pointedly at Sarek.

"Spock is acting on my behalf. I need the information and proof he can gather to influence the Council."

"Husband, this is unforgivable! Not only do you ask Spock and James to risk their lives, but you also ask the Captain to hazard his career. You presume too much, Sarek."

"Amanda, this is the only logical course open to us. The proof can be gathered no other way, and as there are places on Altarra that Spock simply could not go, he requires assistance from someone who can pass as an Altarran. Can you think of anyone more appropriate than James Kirk?" It sounded very reasonable.

"But if they are caught, and manage to survive?" Amanda was not going to be easily diverted. "Half the courts in the galaxy will challenge the other half to see who gets to punish them first," she argued. "You'd be playing right into the hands of the Romulans. You could never show your face in Council again. Then what would be the fate of Altarra? The risks are too great," she added firmly. "I refuse to allow it."

During this exchange Kirk studied the floor covering in great detail and fervently wished he could be somewhere else. He could tell that Spock seemed to be enjoying his father's discomfort, in revenge for his own with Kirk.

"Does my wife think I have decided on this course lightly, without due consideration of all the consequences? Through Federation contacts I have been able to ensure the Captain's absence will not be noted for some time, and Spock and I have prepared in depth so to minimise the not inconsiderable risks." His voice developed a conciliatory edge as he continued, "If there was an alternative course I would take it."

Kirk felt obliged to speak. "Amanda, I want to go. For many reasons." His tone lightened as he said, "Besides, we'll just have to make sure we don't

get caught." He looked at his friend. "I'm assuming of course that you want me along, Spock?"

"I would be honoured by your company."

"That's settled, then," Kirk said decidedly.

"Settled!" Amanda's voice was ragged. "You make it sound like an Academy day trip. I cannot bear..." He control broke suddenly and she turned away quickly, leaving the room.

"My apologies, James. If you will excuse me, Spock will take you to the guest room, and I will join you both shortly in the study. We have much to prepare."

* * *

Within two days of Kirk's arrival all the arrangements had been completed and the trio were ready to leave. Getting Spock and Kirk to Altarra had proved much easier than anyone had dared hope. A Vulcan consular ship regularly shuttled back and forth between its home world and Altarra carrying diplomatic personnel and communications.

That service had not as yet been affected, except that instead of landing on reaching the planet, the Vulcan shuttle docked in space with an equivalent Altarran ship, and the people and materials were transferred while still in orbit. This had been explained away as a 'courtesy' service for the purpose of facilitating Vulcan/Altarran diplomacy.

It also happened to be a most fortuitous arrangement for Sarek, Spock and Kirk, for the shuttle, when it carried only diplomatic correspondence, landed in the non-restricted area of the space terminal. If they could slip undetected onto the Altarran ship they would not have the difficulty of avoiding customs and decontam checks. Sarek's position of importance in the diplomatic service meant he could travel with any number of companions on such a shuttle without question. He also took advantage of his authority to ensure the shuttle he had chosen to travel on carried no personnel, only correspondence.

All was now ready; it only remained to make their departure. Kirk had not seen much of his hostess since his arrival. He did not look forward to saying goodbye to Amanda.

His apprehension was unfounded, for she was completely composed as she wished them farewell at the door of the family home. They watched her standing there motionless until the aircar carried them too distant into the brilliant Vulcan dawn. By full sunrise they were safely installed in the Ambassador's suite aboard the Vulcan ship.

* * *

The journey to Altarra aboard the fast consular ship took but a few short days, every second of which seemed to be filled with activity. Kirk found himself actually glad of the preoccupation. The Starship Captain had ventured to Vulcan partly, as McCoy would say, 'for the hell of it', but mostly because of the implied request from Spock contained in the message tape. He could not but admire Sarek's dexterity with the Terran language and with Human psychology. Idly he wondered if the Vulcan Elder had learned the skill unwittingly from his wife or had acquired it in self-defence. Either was he had effectively manipulated the Human, leaving him far out on a limb. Kirk blushed to think how he had helped to put himself there. Sarek had not twisted his arm. He'd come running at the summons, and had jumped in feet first. 'I want to go,' he'd said, leaving his friend little alternative but to be 'honoured by his company.'

Observing Spock at odd moments during the preparations, through the obscuring haze of Vulcan formality, he could glimpse only the efficient scientist, even when they were alone. Kirk wasn't surprised; he himself was employing Human pride to repress much - embarrassment, anxiety, anger at Sarek's manipulation of him, anger at his own naivete. He didn't care to analyse the

subtler shades. The idea of applying logic to the problem in deference to his hosts made him feel rather queasy, so he reverted to the cherished Human belief that if he ignored it long enough it would go away.

Twenty-four hours out from Altarra found them with the distance between them still unbridged and the time for talking running out, for Sarek had decided it would be safer for them to acquire the Altarran language by the A.L.A.D. method instead of using electronic translators.

The Activated Language Acquisition Device technique required that they be put into a state of deep unconsciousness so the skill to learn language inherent in the young of all articulate beings could be re-awakened. The mind, having retreated to such a deep level free from all distractions, could acquire a language at a speed almost without limit, especially in minds as well-ordered and disciplined as those of the two Starfleet officers.

For the last remaining hours of the flight they dwelt in a place as unknown and strange to them as the most distant world, their own subconscious.

One hour before planetfall Sarek roused them carefully, allowing them to slip gently back to reality at their own pace. A hasty meal with Sarek and changing into their Altarran clothing consumed the last few minutes, leaving only time for the briefest of farewells before they climbed into their place of concealment to await the arrival of the Altarran ship. As the door of the storage locker was closed on them by Sarek they heard the Altarran Captain hail the Vulcan ship, giving docking instructions. Their task had begun.

* * *

The Vulcan ship's control room was hushed as the other ship completed docking procedures. With a swish of air its computers equalised pressures simultaneously in both ships. When all the sensor lights showed green the hatches opened and a briskly efficient team of Altarran crew members entered, observing all the usual protocol laced with a great deal of politeness.

Sarek, adopting the most formal of all Vulcan greeting rituals, welcomed them aboard and insisted they join him in the lounge for the formal handing over of the documents. Greatly impressed by the ceremony this revered Vulcan was lavishing on them, the Altarrans willingly trailed behind in his wake, leaving the almost deserted control room quiet once more.

Tricorder in hand, Spock emerged with Kirk from their hiding place and edged towards the open hatchway. The opening itself and the corridor beyond looked lifeless, but a sensor scan showed a group life-form reading only metres beyond the circuitry accessway that would be their refuge until the shuttle landed. Gaining the accessway would require all their proven ability to move swiftly and silently.

Kirk moved away first from cover and into the Altarran ship, Spock close behind. Such was their economy of movement that the ship's atmosphere was barely stirred, and within seconds they were safely hidden in the shuttle's not over generous accessway. Swopping one restricted area for another was not endearing Jim Kirk to his muscles, and he hoped the Altarrans would feel obliged to carry out their task as couriers with all due haste.

They passed the tedious and uncomfortable journey in complete silence and almost total darkness. Having secured the accessway cover behind him as he entered, Spock had sealed them off from the life of the ship. Except for the hum and occasional glimmer of the circuitry all around them they lacked all sensory experience. They began, each in his own way, to minimise the effects of this deprivation, for they knew that a split-second of confusion as they re-emerged would be all that was needed to fail. A failure in which Sarek's part could not be missed.

With instincts gained through long years in space they could trace the progress of the ship that carried them on its journey. As it undocked from the

Vulcan shuttle they could feel the last door being closed behind them. They were on their own.

Unexpectedly the Altarran ship turned through a full 180°, a rather disconcerting experience for passengers who were not strapped in, and began re-entry. Finally came the landing, which in Kirk's professional judgement was a little too bumpy.

Shortly after landing all activity in the circuitry around them and in the corridor beneath ceased, and they silently agreed the time had come to move. A shuttle of this type could be called into service at any time, but when not in use all maintenance functions reverted to automatic. A final tricorder check showed all clear, and without hesitation Spock pushed out the cover and softly dropped to the floor beneath. Kirk followed, for the first time becoming aware of the higher gravity of Altarra, with which he would have to cope. He reached up and replaced the cover, then followed Spock as they began the part of the journey in which they were most vulnerable to detection.

Although dressed in Altarran clothing Spock's appearance drew an attention to them that they might otherwise have avoided, so with great caution they proceeded to the shuttle's lower level where the cargo hold was located. On an impulse Kirk picked up the largest package he could carry from the many scattered around the hold and indicated that Spock should do likewise. They then both stepped out together into the Altarran sunlight and strode towards the cargo terminal with a deliberation that defied question.

Immediately they were aware of the large numbers of Romulans to be seen among the milling anonymous crowds that characterised spaceports from one end of the galaxy to the other. They reached the terminal building and pused in its shade until Spock selected the door that would take them straight through to the parking area.

Inside they found the terminal humming with organised activity. Most of the work was being done by robot cargo handlers. Feeling rather conspicuous actually carrying something in the temple of mechanisation, Spock hastily put his package down on a cart that ambled slowly past him on its endless journey around the warehouse. Kirk was just about to follow suite when they heard furious steps behind them. The Vulcan deftly slipped further back behind a stack of containers as a man in the coveralls of the spaceport's personnel drew level.

"What exactly are you doing here?" he demanded.

Kirk smiled. "Isn't this Cargo Despatch? I have a package here that must be delivered to the Vulcan shuttle without delay. It's very important."

"I hope it's not too important. You're about two hours too late to catch the Vulcan ship - she's already left orbit." The man pointed to the landing field, saying, "See for yourself - our shuttle is parked right over there."

Kirk moved towards the direction the man indicated, and out of the corner of his eye saw Spock take the opportunity of completing the journey to the exit.

"Guess I'll just have to take this back, then. Sorry to bother you."

"Well, next time make sure you go to Cargo Despatch. This is a secure area, you know - I should report this." He softened. "Go on, you'll be in trouble enough about that delivery without having to tangle with Security... but don't let it happen again!"

Kirk nodded his thanks and left the building. Outside he leaned against the wall, catching his breath as he looked around for Spock. Several hundred metres away he could see the tall figure of his First Officer absorbed in some activity involving the door of a speeder. Still tightly holding the package from the shuttle he weaved his way through the parked vehicles; as he reached the Vulcan, Spock threw open the passenger door.

Getting in smartly, Kirk threw the package onto the back seat, asking

incredulously, "Am I speaking Altarran?"

"Affirmative. You have been using the Altarran language since you awakened on the shuttle."

"It works!" Kirk said. "I really didn't believe it would."

"The A.L.A.D. technique is 75.98% successful. To have invested time otherwise would have been most illogical." Spock indicated the distant view of buildings lying to the west of the route they were travelling. "Those are the high rises of the Western City, our destination. It will take another 54 minutes to reach the rendezvous point."

The tone said there was no need for more discussion, so Kirk settled back to take a good look at the planet that had become so important as they sped along.

Altarra, he decided straight away, was not what he would have expected. What little he knew of it was based on examples of its art, poetry and music, all greatly sophisticated and pretty much the preserve of the specialists. That sophistication was not reflected in the landscape through which they passed. Small homesteads nestled amid extensively used farmland; field after field of wheat was visible to the east until the midday heat haze obscured the horizon. He found he couldn't resist the comparison of the scene with the 'windy Kansas wheatfields' of his own planet.

The routeway they travelled was busy with speeder traffic commuting between the spaceport and the city, but beyond its metallised surface the only method of transport being employed was some unknown species of draught animal. The scene was of a pre-industrial culture. He could ask Spock to explain the seeming conflict, of course, but instead he turned his attention to the sights of the city with which they were rapidly closing.

Stone, glass, steel and concrete were brought together in the Western City of Altarra with a beauty Kirk knew could never be surpassed. Each building was unique, built with one function in mind, to please the eye, yet every structure complemented the one beside it. When viewed as a whole from a little distance away it became a work of art, of which the sky and the distant mountains themselves were a part.

Kirk had no doubt that the city fulfilled many functions, but its primary one was undoubtedly an extravagant indulgence in beauty for beauty's sake. Watching it now as the speeder carried them towards the core he admitted that the confection was its own justification. The Altarrans had discovered a new art form.

The spell the city cast was broken when Spock spoke as he turned the speeder off the main routeway into a basement parking zone. "It's time we abandoned this speeder - I'm sure the Romulans will have set up their surveillance equipment. This vehicle is too easy to trace. It may already have been reported missing."

He cut the engine, and they both got out. Spock leaned back into the cab and retrieved the package that had been dogging them since their arrival. Noting Kirk's sour expression he said, "Don't worry, Jim, you won't have to carry this about for the rest of the trip, just until we find a disposal unit. We can't take any chances even with a detail like this."

He finished tossing the container across the speeder to a reluctant Kirk, who mumbled, "I wonder what's in it, anyway?" Giving it an experimental rattle he shrugged his shoulders and began walking up the steep ramp to the street-level walkway.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later they were seated in the parkland opposite the most well-known of all Western City buildings, the Dybir Theatre. It reached above them, high into the pale blue Altarran sky, looking like a castle plucked from the pages of a Grimms fairytale, imposing yet delicate, beautiful even

among the surrounding excellence.

It had been thought unwise to risk compromising the Director by contacting him directly at first, so as it had in any case been necessary to despatch the answering chess move, Sarek had used it to transmit a message. It remained to be seen if the master chess player would perceive the clue and make contact. If he did not it would then be necessary to devise some method of contacting the Deputy themselves. How it could be done depended on the extent to which Romulan security had succeeded in penetrating. Most certainly all personal calls would be monitored, especially those of known political figures.

They had not yet given up hope of being able to avoid taking such a risk, for it was early in the planet's forenoon. It would be many hours before their presence in the theatre square grew conspicuous. If they had not been approached within the day, one would return in the morning while the other investigated a way of sending a secure message.

Kirk succeeded in tearing his eyes from the Dybir. He felt guilty about abandoning his thoughts to the beauty of the place - he was not, after all, a tourist. He needed to be alert and watchful for any signal without appearing to be so. He knew that Spock was having difficulty watching the passing faces. The Vulcan had been trained to remain aloof from his surroundings. To stare at others not only invaded their privacy but in some way made his own vulnerable. His eyes were frequently and irresistibly drawn back to the pages of the newscan he had bought on their short walk. Scientific curiosity was one thing, this was quite another, made more distasteful with the passing of a member of the sizeable Vulcan community that had made its home on Altarra.

Kirk smiled at Spock's unease and turned his gaze back on the passing parade. The people of Altarra were similar to Humans, down to the DNA in their red blood cells. Some abstruse paper on evolutionary theory could no doubt explain cause and effect of the parallel development and prove it was sheer chance, but it would not stop the feeling of kinship the Starship Captain was experiencing.

The populace, old and young, of every skin tone, facial characteristic and mode of dress one could imagine, all had one thing in common, an open contentment untouched by the threatening storm that would change all. Kirk felt appalled that such a sentence could be pronounced on a centuries-old culture that had made diversity safe and acceptable long before his own kind were prepared to give up the risk of extinguishing themselves over such trifles.

The city itself reminded Kirk of some descriptive passages he'd read of the Old Earth pre-atomic European cities. This, the artistic centre of the metropolis, brought to mind his romantic notions of Paris. Both seemed to be steeped in history and culture, yet had a superficial quality not far removed from frivolity. That thought touched a memory with which it seemed at odds. He realised it had been bothering him since their journey from the spaceport. A few short kilometres beyond the edge of the city was a world of crops and unregulated atmosphere. No frivolity there, almost a brashness, solid and unsophisticated, deep-rooted in the black earth that could have been on any frontier world.

About to comment to Spock on this apparent dichotomy, he looked towards the Vulcan, only to see another Romulan security detachment making its way purposefully through the crowds. Of little interest in itself, his attention was drawn to the effect their passing had on a young Altarran woman who was standing holding a child's hand some little distance away along the adjacent side of the square. She recoiled away from them; the child, sensitive to her anxiety, reached up its arms, asking to be comforted. The unheeding soldiers passed, and immediately her eyes returned to the Human and his Vulcan companion. Finding her gaze returned she hastily picked up the now crying child and set out across the square.

"You continue to observe, Captain - this may not be the contact," Spock said, forestalling Kirk's move to follow the retreating figure, and he set off

with long overtaking strides. Drawing level with her three-quarters of the way across the square, there followed a short, intent discussion, ended by the Vulcan's nodded agreement. He retraced his steps while the woman walked slowly to the far end of the square and stood waiting.

"Jim, she is the contact. She was apprehensive because she expected only a Vulcan. Even now she will only agree to take me to Thur, as she was instructed."

"Spock, I'll follow at a distance. We can't be sure..."

"There is no need, Captain, I know we can trust her. Call it intuition."

Kirk smiled. "Okay, First Officer, but I want you back at the rendezvous point not later than... how long?"

"Three hours should be sufficient, Captain."

"The Port Authority Terminal at sixteen hundred hours."

"Aye, Captain." And he was gone.

Spock allowed the woman to lead the way through the narrow routeways into the city's business section. Pausing only on reaching a two-seater speeder, she put the child down and raised her hand in the Vulcan salute.

"You honour us with your presence. My name is Abby - my father is Deputy for this city. We were pleased by Sarek's prompt response to the message." Her Vulcan was perfect.

I am Spock, and the honour is mine. Are you quite well?"

"I'm afraid father was right - I make a most inept courier. I cannot disguise my fear. Forgive me."

"Unnecessary, your reaction is understandable."

Her colour had improved a little, and she managed to soothe the child at the same time as giving Spock the instructions he required. "We had best make haste. Their security scans are still random, and perhaps the more dangerous for that - we can no longer be sure of people and places. This speeder has been programmed for the journey you must make. I will send the necessary message to my father. We will be waiting for you. Farewell, Spock."

"Live long and prosper, Abby." He started the engine and the vehicle set out on its pre-ordained course.

* * *

The three hours passed quickly amid the sights and sounds of Western City, and with a few minutes in hand Kirk reached the designated meeting place. He carried several paper sacks, one of them containing a variety of the delicacies the planet had to offer. His burden, the higher gravity, and the distance he had walked made the Human glad to sink into a padded seat in the lobby of the terminal building. He hoped Spock would not be delayed, for unless the Vulcan had made arrangements they still had to find a place to stay.

A sensor in the chair, acknowledging that it was occupied, keyed on the viewscreen attached to the arm, and it filled with images of the planet accompanied with soothing music. Kirk found the channel selector and switched over to an information channel. Watching the broadcast he allowed his thoughts to stray. The facility with which the mission had progressed and the normality of the life around him created a false impression. It made him very uneasy.

"Captain Kirk."

The soft murmur from behind set every nerve ending on red alert. James Kirk raised his eyes from the screen but gave no acknowledgement that he had heard.

"Captain, you will accompany me."

The voice was more commanding, and Kirk turned to see the serious face of a young man. The Altarran thrust a hand towards him that clasped a shiny object - a Vulcan IDIC, the medallion his friend had worn to identify him as a Vulcan. Kirk took the IDIC.

"Come." The young man was on his feet.

Gathering his packages into his arms Kirk followed the stranger at a slow pace, attempting to work out the permutations of the new situation. Betrayal? Kidnapping? It was impossible to predict; there were too many unknowns. Having followed the line of reasoning as far as he could he quickened his step to walk side by side with the Altarran.

Half an hour later the Captain was still apace of his guide, but his patience had worn thin. He had failed to extract any further information from the young man - the Altarran insisted he was merely following instructions, and had not seen the Vulcan of whom the Captain spoke.

Unexpectedly Kirk found himself being shepherded into the deserted parking court of a habitat block. His apprehension grew as they crossed the empty space and reached the darkened entrance porch.

Finally Kirk rebelled against the passive role that had been forced upon him since planetfall. The packages fell into an untidy heap as he grabbed the Altarran's arm, spinning him round to meet his eyes. The collar of the well-cut Altarran tunic was crushed and distorted as Kirk became the inquisitor. The answering blank fear he received only increased the Captain's anger.

Behind them the entrance door swung open, and the light beyond it permeated the porch. As it grew more intense the unfortunate youth seemed to grow visibly younger and more frightened. Kirk's anger subsided.

"Captain, that will not be necessary."

Foolishness replaced the vanished anger as a relieved Kirk took in the disapproving Vulcan face.

"Spock, I should have recognised your hand in the exuberant invitation." He released the youth, who took a few involuntary steps backwards and a deep breath. Stepping over his fallen belongings he held out the IDIC towards Spock. "Yours, I believe."

As the small group went inside shock at the scene they had just witnessed was written large on the Altarran faces. Undaunted by the poor beginning, Spock began making the introductions.

Deputy Thur was a small, soberly-dressed man with an almost tangible halo of worry.

"Captain Kirk, welcome to Altarra. Spock has said we may call on your assistance at this difficult time. We are grateful. Let's go through to the living area. You will take refreshment?" The Deputy's pragmatic mind ticked over. The behaviour the Human had displayed might have been unpleasant, but it could be just what he needed.

Deputy Thur, like many other politicians the Starfleet officers had encountered, enjoyed playing centre-stage. His mode of speech was detailed and heavily embroidered. Kirk stifled an exasperated sigh and stole a glance at Spock. From the somewhat glazed expression on the Vulcan's face he could tell that having listened to the lecture once already he considered it illogical to do so again, and was engaged in analysing the new data. Thur paused to lend emphasis, and Kirk saw his chance.

"Of course, Deputy, I am familiar with the major landmarks in Altarran history. The galaxy has drawn inspiration from it. Most admirable. But surely recent history is more pertinent?"

"I am coming to that, Captain. What you must realise is that our present

difficulties have their roots in the past. The peace we attained was founded partly on the Vulcan model, logic, but also on the basis of trust. Here the collective will is controlled for the good of both the individual and society. We have lost our aggressive and acquisitive tendencies, without losing personal freedom. In the years that followed there was a great flowering of learning; philosophy flourished. In our new-found wisdom we again exerted control, for rampant technology can be as devastating as conflict. It fulfills our need, and we are content. Earth culture has a word, Utopia?"

Kirk nodded, and Thur continued.

"But several decades ago some disturbing trends developed, and a Commission of Social Studies was set up." He walked to stand by the large window that bounded a sky still ridged by the light of Altarra's binary suns. "You will have observed our planet on the journey in from the spaceport. 99% of the surface area and some 83% of our population are engaged exclusively in agricultural activities. Our industries, such as they are, are confined to the planetary satellite Angor, and employ a mere 2% of our people. The remaining 15% are resident in the cities, working in administration and service industries. Here also are the centres for education and scientific and cultural advance."

"And the two sectors of the population have grown apart," Kirk volunteered.

"Exactly, Captain; how perceptive of you. Each group is content, but alien to the other. This is not how our ancestors saw the future of Altarra. It is... wrong."

The hostess, who had been introduced as Chora, and who seemed familiar to Kirk, entered the discussion.

"It also leads to abuse. That is, I fear, inevitable and unacceptable, even when it is benevolent."

"What kind of abuse?" Kirk asked.

"By default, the conduct of planetary affairs fell to the professional politicians and diplomats. Altarra is in the sway of an elite, almost a sub-culture, with absolute power. The education system perpetuates the status quo. Rural schools prepare the young for a rural life; those showing potential are creamed off at an early age, are brought to the cities, and seldom return. Some of my Fellow Deputies who represent districts outside the City visit them perhaps once in a Council session."

"I can see the inherent danger, but I find it hard to believe even this 'elitist' group would take advantage of their position and sell out to the Romulans. How would it profit them?"

"No, Captain, we have not sold out to the Romulans. What has been done has been done without malice. It was a mistake in judgement. Let me explain. The first symptom of the malaise was in our achievements in the Arts. After the Attainment of Peace they reached a peak, then seemed to lose direction. The socio-computers quickly isolated the problem and made a prediction. Within ten lifetimes the civilisation of Altarra, encapsulated as it is in the Cities, will decline, becoming swamped by the more vibrant Rural culture. The Altarra we know will be no more."

A shudder passed through the room as Thur voiced the events these people feared most.

"It was when the prediction was made that outside influences began to affect the decision-making process."

"Outside influences?" questioned the Captain.

"He means Vulcan, Jim." Spock had roused himself to become part of the discussion. "There are closer ties between Altarra and Vulcan than even Sarek realised. There is a large Vulcan population concentrated here in the Capital. They have full citizenship rights. They have become involved in policy decisions in the Altarran government."

"What form does the involvement take?" Kirk asked.

"That is known only to the Inner Council," replied Thur. "I have never been privy to that, and since I voiced my opposition I find myself being kept on the outside." He took two pictures from a file and put them face up on the table. "I know that several Vulcan advisors, among them these two, T'Elise and Svam, frequently attend Cabinet meetings."

Spock glanced at the two profiles. "These have strong links with the Traditionalist Reform Party on my home planet. This political alliance would see Altarra as a way to bring the Romulans back into the fold."

"How?" Kirk asked, a little sceptically.

"Almost by attraction - the cumulative effect of Altarran/Romulan integration."

"In short, Altarra gets back its sense of purpose, and the Romulans get civilised."

"Essentially yes, Captain Kirk."

Kirk thought it over for a moment; it was difficult to swallow. "What makes them think it will work? Can it work?"

Chora answered. "They have a computer prediction that says it will."

"But the Altarran system - with all due respect - is an insignificance compared with the Romulan Empire."

Thur smiled. "The case of the asto seed, Captain?"

"I'm sorry, Deputy..."

"Jim, the tale of the horse-shoe nail is the Terran analogue." Spock could be most irritating at times.

Chora had grown impatient. "Whether or not it will work is hardly the issue. Unless this misguided crusade is halted millions will die or suffer a life that is worse; a culture will die; perhaps even the planetary system itself will be devastated. Some of us have even started to pay the price."

Kirk recognised her then. "Rono and Margetta?" he questioned gently.

"Yes, Captain. My brother and sister. I want their lives to be the payment in full."

"How can we help?"

Kirk was surprised by the Vulcan's question, and Spock caught his look. "It's not a question of interference, Captain. That mistake has already been made."

"Spock is right," the Deputy deftly intervened. "All Altarra has the right to make such a decision."

"I'm sure the Romulans would like to be consulted, too. They might not want to be house-trained."

"Captain?"

"Undergo behaviour modification." Kirk explained the term. "The evidence must be unimpeachable."

"The socio-computer file will provide all the evidence we need. The problem lies in obtaining it."

Thur held up his hand to stop further discussion. "Captain Kirk, Spock, you need rest. I regret that I cannot welcome you to my home, but I am sure you will be comfortable here in the house of Chora and Jann. We will meet tomorrow to make plans."

* * *

Before dawn the following morning Kirk was awakened by the soft door chimes that reached into every corner of the apartment. Listening to the muffled

snatches of conversation he dressed and found his way back through the spacious rooms to the living area. Spock sat cross-legged on the floor, blueprints spread out before him covering the geometric pattern of the floor tapestries.

"Morning, Spock!" Kirk grimaced as his bare feet contacted the cold tile of the dining room. He looked round; there was no coffee.

Chora murmured a greeting as she backed out of the kitchen door carrying several dishes. "I'm not familiar with Terran cuisine, Captain, so we're eating Vulcan-style this morning."

Kirk sat down, trying not to look at his plate. "I heard the door bell. Is Everything okay?"

"Yes, Captain, everything is 'okay'. Deputy Thur sent a message to say he will not risk coming here again. He is wise in these matters. When plans have been made he will be told. The others will come shortly."

Kirk glanced back towards the living area.

"Your friend has already eaten, Captain. May I join you?" Chora asked.

Kirk looked at her ruefully. "My friend does not seem to be communicating this morning."

She thought for a moment. "The information we seek will bring disgrace to many important families on Vulcan. It is regrettable. I believe it concerns him greatly - though not as much as you do, Captain."

Kirk looked at her sharply. She continued, "Spock was very concerned about failing to meet you yesterday. He insisted we send someone before you acted ill-advisedly."

"I really make him suffer," Kirk said in mock anguish.

"Isn't a little suffering good for the soul, Captain?"

"Chora, you are one perceptive lady; and please, my name is Jim." He toasted her with the shell-like porcelain teacup.

* * *

Withing the hour the group of Altarrans the Captain had met the day before had assembled, with the exception of the elderly Thur. There was one new face, and before the discussion began the newcomer was introduced as Davya, a computer tech from the Social Science Institute. They all gathered around the ample dining table, on which were strewn the blueprints that had received Spock's earlier attention.

Davya arranged the plastic sheets into order, and then coughed to indicate her readiness to begin.

"The information we require is held within the memory core of the Institute's main computer, which is situated on the entire 14th floor of the building. There is no hard copy in existence. Anyone attempting to tap the data without the proper procedure will automatically wipe it clean. The data itself is contained in a sub-routine of a low grade research project. It will take 11.34 minutes to save the data onto a micro-file." She briefly explained the layout of the computer room, and then turned her attention to the floor above.

"Getting into the control room itself will be the most difficult step. It is a code green clearance zone. Security have in the past let me bring people in, but everyone can have an off day. I couldn't guarantee admittance."

"Deputy Thur is working on that, Davya; it shouldn't be a problem," Chora said, questioning further. "What about getting into the computer room itself?"

"No problem. I can get all the passes you need. Down there is as busy as Western Spaceport."

"Good - activity is the best cover we can get."

Davya sat down. "The information is accessed using a 12 digit symbolic code. I have half the code, the other half is known only to the second member of my duty team. Depending on the shift that could be any one of 6 different techs."

"Any progress with your fellow workers, Davya?" Jann asked hopefully.

"I've spoken to three so far without success. They know as well as I do what's in that file, but they show no disaffection. Perhaps they are being cautious of me. Who can tell?"

"Better not push too far, Davya," Jan counseled. "We don't want to arouse suspicion."

"Right; and by the way, you asked me to keep a watch on Romulans in the buliding. Well, they mustn't be interested in Social Studies - they haven't even made a routine check."

Chora made a face. "I wonder whether that's good or bad."

As the discussion eddied and flowed across the table Kirk found himself having to re-assess the Altarrans as a race. If this group was typical the image they presented to the galaxy was way, way off.

Something Jann was saying caught his attention. "Then the other half of the code will have to be taken from him." He looked directly at Spock, then lowered his gaze. "If there was another way of getting that code, I wouldn't ask."

Spock stood and paced slowly to the edge of the room, far from the rest of its occupants. The quietness that claimed them sifted into every gap and space, and beyond them out into the cliudless sky itself. It reigned until Kirk could stand it no longer.

"Spock, you can't do this. Tell them no. We can solve this without asking such a thing of you."

He was halted by the look of contempt on the Vulcan face that turned to look at him. Yet again Kirk had managed to say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

"Yes, Captain, I suppose you could always beat it out of him."

"There would be less dishonour in that than in what they want!" Kirk snapped back.

Spock ignored the reply. "You may make the arrangements. I will comply."

"Spock... please wait." The desperate Human turned to the others. "May I speak with Spock alone?"

Reluctantly Jann nodded and led the others from the room.

Kirk listened for the closing door, then took a deep breath. "I was out of line speaking just now. Forgive me. The decision is, of course, yours. I guess I'll never learn when to keep my mouth shut. But don't let my stupidity push you into this. Please, Spock, reconsider. I know you well enough to know you'll regret this the rest of your life."

Jim Kirk couldn't even guess at what was going on in the mind of his friend. The eyes were unreadable.

"Spock, do I have to beg?"

The Vulcan closed his eyes tightly to shut out the sight of Jim Kirk's pleading face. It cut deeply into his consciousness, demanding a response that he could not, would not give. He subdued the urge to strike out at the Human, run from him, anything to prevent surrender to his suffocating emotions. For one of the few moments in his life he felt panic sweep through his mind, but before it could take hold basic conditioning triggered like the failsafe on a circuit, restoring equilibrium. His eyes opened, showing unnatural coldness, and Jim Kirk knew it was too late. Still, he had to try.

"Spock, tell me what's wrong? Since the night on the Orion you've been a stranger to me."

"If you wish an answer to that question, Captain, you will have to be more specific."

Kirk was becoming hurt and angry in a way that only Humans can be with someone they love. "Specifically, have I done something to offend you, or is it the universe in general that's out to get you? Someone must have really got you mad to make you abandon every principle you've ever laid claim to. One thing I'm not sure of - are you punishing us, or yourself?"

"I will act as I see fit, Captain, for logical reasons which I need not explain to you. Now if you will excuse me..."

Kirk caught his arm as he passed. "One thing more, Mister. I'm a part of this mess now whether you like it or not. I don't know who's right and who's wrong. Personally, I'm unconvinced that this kind of Altarra deserves to be perpetuated. But the Federation needs to know what's going on here. It's your duty and mine to see that they do. If any of your psychological hang-ups threaten to get in the way of that, just remember that neither I nor the Federation are responsible for them."

Spock pulled himself away. "I consider myself duly warned, Captain."

* * *

The Altarran hosts proved remarkable good at ignoring the open hostility between the two erstwhile friends following their return. Kirk, being in no mood to observe the niceties, quickly took command of the discussion, and with a practiced ease organized each detail of the task that lay before them. He then appropriated a bottle of the locally produced intoxicant and disappeared into his room.

Spock remained in the physical sense in the living room, and even took part fleetingly in the conversation, but his thoughts were elsewhere, and this the people around him respected.

Thus they passed the hours until the time came to rest in preparation for the long, difficult day ahead.

* * *

The Altarran Institute of Social Science was constructed on an artificial island set in a lake of still, sapphire water. Radiating from the island, engineered so that they seemed to hover above the surface, were a series of routeways. James Kirk, dressed in technician's coveralls and accompanied by Jann and Chora, similarly attired, made his way along one of the pedestrian bridges towards the building.

He was grateful for the cooling breeze that came across the lake without stirring the perfect mirror image it reflected. As he walked he studied the area carefully, more from the strategist's point of view than from that of the admirer of beauty. He eyed the lake, hoping fervently that everything would go well. Trying to quieten the mixture of anxiety and anticipation he felt he glanced at his chronometer. Spock would be leaving the apartment to rendezvous with the Deputy in a few minutes. The well-respected elder statesman had easily arranged a tour for a Vulcan scientist acquaintance. The Head of the Institute had been only too delighted, insisting that lunch be included. Kirk cringed at the memory of the frosty greeting they had received from Spock that morning. He hoped the Vulcan would be able to thaw enough to make even a passing attempt at sociability.

A few more paces and they were at the bottom of the sweep of white stone steps that led to the main entrance to the building. The routeways and courtyards around were busy with the commuter traffic that daily brought the thousands of purposeful individuals to the Institute. The three melted into the crowd as they attached the passes Davya had provided.

Once in through the doors Kirk had trouble suppressing his wonder at the the hall in which he found himself. As it was virtually devoid of ornamentation he had a clear view to the distant wall opposite, which was a sympathetic reflection of the lake beyond. The remaining walls were white, except for a band of vivid, almost harsh colours, two metres in depth, that ran three-quarters of the way round the room. Kirk recognised it as the exquisite tapestry weave he had seen so frequently since his arrival, but this example departed from the rigid geometric patterning he associated with the art, and formed a series of loosely connected random symbols.

Chora guided his footsteps closer to the wall and explained, "This is the Rexel Tapestry. It is a symbolic representation of Altarran history. Look over to the far wall."

He did so; there where the colour ended was a large wooden frame, before which sat an elderly woman intent on the work in front of her.

Chora continued, "She is Anya Taple. She is the fourth generation of her family to work on the Rexel. If you look closely you can see the slight changes in style."

"It's very beautiful. I wonder how it will end."

She sighed. "How indeed, Captain?"

A few seconds later, the lift deposited them on the floor that housed the Institute's main computer.

* * *

Some kilometers distant Spock and Deputy Thur were climbing into the politician's official aircar. Precisely on time they arrived at the Institute and were greeted by the Director himself. After a very formal introduction they began the tour.

It took forty-five minutes for the Director and his guests to reach the thirteenth floor. Spock instantly located the Captain among the flurry of technicians and researchers. Looks were exchanged, and Spock turned to the Director.

"Sir, may we proceed? I have made sufficient observations here."

A little deflated, the Director agreed, and they returned to the private turbo-lift that awaited them.

"The next floor is taken up with a conference suite and other computer facilities. It contains little of note." The doors opened and the Director continued, "So with your permission we will go straight on to the pre-Attainment artifact display, and then to lunch."

His hand reached out to the floor selector; it did not reach its goal. Spock caught the wrist firmly and held it, only to find his mind awash with the fear and apprehension emanating from the Director. The effect was quickly negated, but it had increased from distaste to loathing the idea of the task ahead.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Director," Thur mumbled apologetically, "but we'll have to cancel the rest of the tour. You will accompany us to the next floor."

Spock guided the Altarran's hand to the lighted control panel and rested it on it. They didn't have to ask.

"Fourteenth floor."

The doors opened on a floor much quieter and more lavishly furnished than the one that had preceeded it. Spock knew exactly where to lead the unprotesting Administrator. Soon they were in the small computer control room where Davya stood waiting for them. The only other person in the room, a well built, middle aged man, glanced around at their entrance and quickly stood.

"Mr. Director, are you ill?"

He helped his ashen-faced superior to a chair and started to fetch a glass of water, but stopped, intrigued by a conversation Davya was having with the tall Vulcan.

"You will have little time, Spock! A Council Member called to book computer time. He is always prompt, and will be here shortly. I will select a terminal and key in my code now."

With expert moves she instructed the powerful machine to do her bidding and left it patiently waiting for the final sequence. Then, without a backward glance, she crossed to the door. "I'll wait below."

The door closed behind her, and Spock locked it with the Director's identity disc.

"May I ask what's going on, Mr. Director?" the tech asked calmly, but got no reply. "Deputy?"

Thur thought for a moment and then extended his hand, clasped round a small metal object. "Do you know what this is?" He peered at the name tag on the man's coveralls. "North?"

"No, sir," North answered truthfully.

"It's a weapon. Don't look so shocked - such things are obtainable even here on Altarra."

"What do you want?"

"Not very much, just your cooperation." The Deputy walked over to the monitor screen. "Look at the input Davya just typed in."

The technician did so. "You want me to complete the code."

"Precisely."

"I can't. I am duty bound to protect that information. I took an oath. Who are you? Why did Davya do this...? Romulans!" He looked at Spock.

"No, North, you are wrong. I am as much a loyal Altarran as you. Spock is Vulcan. But there is no time for all this. Will you comply?"

"No; and if you use that machine you will be trying to get the code from a dead man. Your actions prove you are no friend of Altarra."

Thur sighed deeply. "Spock."

The Vulcan steepled his hands in a vain attempt to prepare for the meld. North knew instinctively what was about to happen and, horrified, shrank away from Spock. The first searing edge of the forced contact was sufficient to crumble the resolve of the Altarran's resistance, and Spock joyfully parted their thoughts.

"Forgive me?" he requested illogically, knowing that what he had done was unforgivable.

The man's face showed undisguised hatred, tinged with rebellion.

"I saw the idea of keying the alarm sequence in your mind. Don't. I have an A7 computer rating."

The tech went to the console and after only a slight hesitation completed the code. The screen signalled READY, and Spock leaned across to instruct SAVE. As he straightened up he reached for the sensitive nerves in the Altarran's neck; North slipped into oblivion, and Spock allowed the body to fall onto the padded tapestry floor.

"Mr. Director, you will come with us now." He could tell he wasn't going to get an argument. Outside he locked the door to the control room and sealed it; opening it would exercise the minds of Security for a very long time.

They began their journey to the ground floor. Stepping from the lift they were immediately aware of the changed atmosphere in the lobby that was liberally

sprinkled with Romulans. Spock pulled the other two back and closed the door.

"I did nothing to warn them!" The Director issued a nervous disclaimer.

"Is there another way out?"

"There is my personal flyer on the roof."

"Select the next floor, then go to the roof. Don't ask for permission to take off."

The lift stopped at Spock's destination, and Thur said, "I thank thee, Spock."

Spock nodded gravely, and then located the door to the stairwell. His time sense told him some 13.75 minutes had elapsed since the programme had begun running. Jim and the others would be on their way. He emerged into the lobby again just as James Kirk walked out, preceeding the others, and headed for the main exit.

Spock identified one of the junior officers checking passes and went straight towards him. At the last moment he side-stepped the checkpoint and began to run. A harsh Romulan command sounded, and the Vulcan became the centre of their undivided attention.

Kirk watched Spock's abortive flight with a sinking sensation, and came to a decision.

"Jann, you'll have to deliver this." He forced the micro-file into the man's reluctant hand.

"I can't."

"You have no choice. Good luck."

Jann, looking unhappy, grasped Chora's hand and together with Davya they skirted the gathering crowd and left the building.

With Romulan precision Spock had been apprehended and was led back to the Commander of the detachment. There was a short exchange between the two, and then the Commander turned back to his officers, issuing curt instructions. The troopers began a systematic search.

Kirk allowed the area to quieten a little then he edged nearer to the Romulan guard, who were preparing to move their prisoner from the lobby to the aircar waiting outside. He did not know their destination, but the efficiency of Romulan security procedures meant the time to act was now, in this public place, full of confusion and where the atmosphere was verging on hostility to the Romulans.

He could just see Spock through a gap in the ranks of the guards; he seemed uninjured. Glancing around for a suitable diversion, Kirk's eye was caught by an elaborate crystalline structure, almost five metres tall, rising shimmering out of a pool of blue water. It was a masterpiece of precision and balance, through which water cascaded and fell. It was the closest thing he had seen to the concept of a Terran fountain.

Walking to it, he searched his pockets and drew out a credit card. Surreptitiously he slipped the piece of plastic across one of the major water outlets at the base of the sculpture, then walked across to stand behind the serried ranks of the Romulan detachment.

Already the imbalance in the structure caused by the build-up of liquid was causing ominous cracking sounds. Activity ceased, and all eyes were drawn to the now-trembling crystal. A deafening roar washed out from the centrepiece as a million crystals sheared along the line of cleavage and spilled outwards, carried wide by the water.

The Romulans, along with everyone else in the vicinity, instinctively half turned away, protecting their faces from the shower, and in that moment Kirk reached in between them; grabbing Spock by the collar he half-dragged the Vulcan towards the major exit, sensing the Romulans only seconds behind them.

They both braked sharply as they neared the doors to the outside world. There, coming up the steps, no doubt drawn by the commotion, was the other half of the Security detachment.

With options and time rapidly running out, Kirk allowed the Vulcan to steer him backwards, veering right to where a bank of turbo-lifts was located. Moving at a run through the wide-eyed Altarrans they made for the one car stopped at ground level, its doors open and inviting. They reached it as the automatic mechanism instructed the car to answer a call on another floor. Spock braced himself against the closing doors, giving Kirk time to get in before allowing the doors to snap shut.

Jim Kirk leaned heavily against the wall and allowed himself three greedy lungfuls of air before looking at his friend.

"I must be getting too old for this," he complained to the cool, unruffled Vulcan.

"It's unlikely, Captain, that you'll be getting any older," Spock said accusingly, but without, Kirk was pleased to notice, any bitterness. "I assumed you and the file would by now be well on your way to the Spaceport."

"Jann has had greatness thrust upon him. I hope our reluctant hero is up to it." He pretended not to see the pessimistic look on Spock's face. "Any joy with the controls?" He indicated the panel which Spock had opened.

"I've disconnected the visual displays. They can't tell which way we are travelling," Spock answered, working with the intricate wiring.

"The basement will be our best bet, garaging access and service outlets." Kirk wondered why he felt compelled to continue with the charade. Only an inept or foolish commander would have failed to seal the building by now.

"I concur," said the Vulcan, instructing the lift to descend without stopping to the lowest level.

They were unprepared for the sudden wrenching halt and the simultaneous darkness into which they were thrown as the power was cut. Three seconds later the red glow of the emergency light came on and found them groggily extricating themselves from a tangle on the floor.

"Any idea where we are?" Kirk said instead of the obscenity that leapt into his mouth.

Spock closed his eyes calculatingly, his senses still unsteady from the shock. "We are slightly below the floor level above the basement."

"We're going to have to move now. Can you help me with the doors?" Kirk said, giving his companion as long as possible to recover.

"Affirmative." And to prove it he calmly ripped the steel control panel free from the wall. "For bracing," he explained.

Each taking a firm grip on a door they prised them apart and Spock manoeuvred the steel sheet between them. The floor level was located some 20 centimetres below the ceiling of the car. It would be a tight squeeze.

"I knew there had to be a good reason for all that lettuce," Kirk sighed, making a step-up with his hands. "If I may?" he offered.

With great agility, and a little help from Kirk, Spock was boosted up and after a brief scan of the hallway he squirmed out and quickly turned back to the lift, kneeling to reach down to Kirk. A great deal of effort later they both stood viewing their surroundings.

This level was apparently given over to some kind of storage, probably research records. As far as they could see in all directions stretched corridors of doors, each clearly labelled with a catalogue number.

Their respite from pursuit was to be short-lived. Rapid hard sounds of boots on concrete could be heard approaching, seemingly from all directions.

"They're more efficient than I thought," muttered Kirk as he reached for the nearest door. At first it appeared locked, but after some determined pulling it swung open slowly and they entered the room beyond.

With an effort they closed the door behind them again. It was made of steel, and had an old-fashioned electronic locking mechanism.

"This is one of the oldest sections of the city," Spock hypothesised aloud. "These storage areas were probably designed to ensure the safety of the records, with some kind of natural disaster in mind." He keyed the locking control and then crushed the circuitry with his fist.

They looked around the room. It was about nine metres square, and every square centimetre of wall space from floor to ceiling was filled with cabinets. Kirk sat down and allowed his head to fall back to rest against the cold steel of the door. Spock paced the perimeter several times.

"Did you get any indication of why the Romulans chose today to check this building?"

"They have had the Deputy under surveillance for some time. They had observed my meeting with him, and had identified me - probably you also. They were waiting to discover the full extent of our involvement. Conspiracy is difficult to prove; they waited until we acted."

"Why did you behave in that illogical fashion?"

"Well, Captain, it was the only logical way for me to salvage the mission."

"I see."

"Of course, the probability that Jann and the others will accomplish delivery is extremely low." He paused, calculating. "I can give you an approximation of the odds."

Kirk sensed rather than saw his friend's smile. He answered it with a grin. "I'm sure you could. He didn't need Spock to calculate the odds on their own chances of survival; he put the idea from his mind. His face crinkled up in a smile, and Spock's puzzled look drew an explanation from the Human.

"I was just wondering what you thought of me that first day I came aboard." He didn't wait for a reply. "I was pretty sure of myself in those days. A real pain, I suppose?"

"Vulcans do not make hasty judgements, or superficial ones, but I knew then that I had met a man I would be proud to call T'hy'la... brother."

James Kirk, embarrassed and humbled by Spock's reply to his flippant question, could not remain silent, yet he considered lest he stray too far along the path to emotionalism. That, at least, he could spare his friend.

"Spock, T'hy'la, the honour is mine. I would call us foolish for not speaking before, but we have lost nothing by silence, and it makes this time all the more precious."

Spock's acknowledgement was a slight bow of the head, for all the words that were needed had been used up. Only quiet, blissful contemplation would suffice.

* * *

The Vulcan's high audio discriminatory sense made him aware of the sound long before the Human. He analysed it, determined the source, and then blocked it from his conscious thoughts. Now Kirk's restlessness showed he too could hear the relentless sound, which was steadily increasing in intensity.

"Jim, they are using a dinatron bit. Calculating their rate of progress and the thickness of the door, they will reach the locking mechanism long before the oxygen is consumed."

It was the first time either had voiced the inevitable. Spock saw Kirk's

shudder at the prospect. Trapped, helpless, it was the inevitable panic of all life kind, a panic beyond reason, and although Kirk could master it he knew the Captain would prefer to die at the hands of their Romulan adversaries rather than in an airless box.

The whine of the drilling bit reached a critical pitch, and Spock started to cover his ears to minimise its effects, but he never managed it. From all around him the colour began to drain away, leaving only greying patches. The patches filled with cracks, and he was afraid to breathe in case the movement shattered reality.

But he wasn't breathing, he couldn't move, nor even correlate data. Then with an abruptness that was painful he began to spin, accelerating out of control. A tiny speck of life in an infinite black space...

Without warning a point of reference returned in the form of a transporter pad a good two metres below his feet, onto which he promptly fell in response to a ship-board gravity.

Scraping together what remained of his will power he raised his head to see if the Captain too had survived the experience. Some kind of transporter... Maybe McCoy had been right all along... His blurred vision could distinguish Kirk, and the movement of his chest as he breathed; then to his relief he blacked out.

"Spock."

He pushed the sound away.

"Spock, we need your help."

His instinct was to sink deeper into the healing trance; it was too soon... But the familiar voice would not be ignored. Carefully he opened his eyes and focused on a face.

"Jann." The vowel seemed to be in the wrong place, and his skin didn't seem to fit any more.

"By all that's just, you made it! I thought I'd killed you!"

Spock tried to blink, hoping the relief wasn't premature. "The Captain?"

"He is well, as you are."

The Vulcan winced. "Cargo?"

"Ore transporter, actually. I know I hadn't the right, but..."

"You acted correctly. It was quite an achievement. I commend your skill. Thank you."

"Don't." The Altarran held up his hand. "You see, our problems aren't over yet."

He helped Spock into a chair before a navigation console, and switched to a reverse camera view. There, in all its splendour, was a Romulan Warbird.

"Not such a good rescue?"

"The odds have improved."

"You think we have a chance?"

"I'll need the Captain's assistance. Is he recovered?"

"He's still out."

"Then I suggest you use a very strong stimulant." He began to check through the ore carrier's specifications

* * *

It was a full ten minutes before James Kirk could attempt to walk the short distance to the console. Catching sight of his reflection in a shiny

piece of metal he could see that he was a healthy shade of Vulcan green. He halted the solicitous enquiries of his First Officer. "I'd rather not talk about it, Spock. Bring me up to date."

Jann listened for a while to the report and the ensuing conversation, but finding that he could not understand more than one word in five, he gave up.

"Okay, Spock, that looks like the best option. Set it up."

"Aye, Captain." The Vulcan bent enthusiastically to the task.

"Jim, there is something you should know," Jann said, his voice tinged with shame. "I stole this freighter." He didn't give the Human time to comment. "We couldn't get near our own ship - there were Romulans everywhere, as if they were waiting for us."

"They were. We all under-estimated their security."

"Oh! Well, the command module of the freighter was the only means of transportation we could get close to, so we took it. Its auto-pilot took it into orbit and docked it with the ore-trailer... and you know the rest."

"Yes. It was... an interesting experience."

Jann pointed to the Romulan vessel. "That's been sitting on our tail since we made orbit. Why didn't they just take us? I don't understand."

"Because of this." Kirk flipped open a covered control. "They want the information as badly as we do, so they'll not put it or themselves at risk to get it. They want the tape and ourselves intact. They'll go for a boarding party action - quite soon, I should think."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other.

"Captain, the course is plotted and laid in, and the trip switches are activated."

Kirk laughed. "Should I cross my fingers?"

"If you think it will help, Captain."

Kirk slammed his fist down on the self-destruct button.

Freed from its burdensome ore-filled trailer the freighter's command module engine kicked it hard towards light speed. And in that same second the obliterating explosion of the trailer itself opened up a temporary gap in spacetime and nudged the module into it. Spock cut the engines and lowered himself to the floor to join the others awaiting the end of the stomach-churning trip.

Thirteen minutes passed before they plummeted out of the effect into normal space.

Kirk pulled himself to his feet. "Congratulations, Spock, but I warn you, if we're in Romulan space I'll have to bust you to Lieutenant!"

"Then I am glad to report, Captain, that we are twelve parsecs inside Federation space, and in one of the major shipping lanes."

Jann found his feet and his voice. "Captain, you might have warned us - that was quite a risk you took." He laughed suddenly, and took Kirk's outstretched hand, shaking it warmly. "Okay, we're even, Captain."

"One thing I'd like to know, Jann. How did you locate Spock and me for that beam-up?"

"Your chronometer. Daputy Thur is very cautious, and you were an unknown quantity. It contains a locator/transmitter. It just had to home in on its frequency."

"He planted a bug on me?" But he was too exhausted to be upset. "Spock, have you broadcast a distress call?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Good. Any chance of the Enterprise? I'd like to go home."

* * *

McCoy leaned back and watched James Kirk struggle with the fastening at the collar of his dress tunic.

"Jim, now that you have Starfleet Command eating out of your hand, drop a few hints about upping the comfortability factor of 'Fleet uniforms. I for one have suffered long enough."

"I think you over-estimate my influence, Bones. Who am I to dictate the design of uniforms? After all, I only wear them." He grinned at McCoy through the mirror as he raked a brush through his hair. "Bones, there is something I want to talk to you about before Spock comes."

"Yeah? And where is Mr. Personality? I thought he'd be here."

"He had a lot of loose ends to see to. You know what he's like."

"Sure do, that's why I'm not going to wait any longer." With great ceremony he uncorked the bottle of champagne he had lovingly carried to the Captain's quarters, and in a wide, sweeping gesture he presented the label for Jim Kirk's inspection.

"Wow, that's quite a vintage! I've sampled it somewhere before... haven't I?" The he remembered. "The Orion. I remember the fuss the First Officer made over it. Bones, you didn't!"

"Jim, someone's got to take advantage of your reputation if you won't. Though I must admit I was a little surprised myself when they sent over the case."

"A case?" Kirk groaned audibly.

"I kept meaning to tell you," McCoy said sheepishly, "then all hell broke loose and I forgot about it." They both re-lived the unpleasant memory.

"I finished reading your report on Altarra, Jim. Now I know why Spock has been acting so strange since you returned. That abuse of the meld must really have got to him."

"I hadn't noticed anything wrong. How do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain. Dare say it's just a 'feeling' I have. Surely you know better than I. You had plenty of opportunity to talk to him on Altarra. I thought you'd have sorted it all out."

"On Altarra he was so distant with me as to be virtually out of sight. I couldn't talk to him. Then when we got trapped it didn't seem important. Since then there have been the reports to write, he took on the job of preparing the computer file personally..." He considered for a moment. "You're right, Bones; there is something wrong, and I've failed him again. That meld, and the interference of that Vulcan group on Altarra... How could I have been so insensitive?"

He didn't wait for a reply. The cabin doors snapped shut behind him. McCoy leaned back to wait; there was no place for him there. He twirled the glass around in his hand. That was the trouble with Spock - there was plenty of give in him, but no take. That pride of his wouldn't let him ask for or accept what was due to him in a friendship like the one he shared with Jim. And either you accepted all the facets of that special relationship, or it was meaningless. He walked to the wall intercom.

"Bridge, McCoy here. Can you tell me where Mr. Spock is at present?"

"Yes, sir. He beamed down to 'Fleet Headquarters about three hours ago."

McCoy cut the link without acknowledgement, then went to pour himself another drink.

Captain James T. Kirk returned several minutes later, holding a message tape.

He was white-faced with a hurt that was close to anger.

"Commander Spock's formal resignation. It seems he didn't think it necessary to leave any kind of personal message."

"What could he say, Jim? It was..."

The door buzzer sounded, and McCoy cursed whoever it was.

"Come in."

The door opened on an extremely beautiful woman dressed in the uniform of a full Commander.

"Captain Kirk? I'm Lori Ciani." She had a beautiful smile. "Admiral Nogura asked me to accompany you and your officers to the reception."

Kirk gathered his pride around him. "How thoughtful of the Admiral. Bones, are you ready?"

McCoy nodded.

"There is just one thing I have to do if you wouldn't mind waiting?"

"Of course not, Captain Kirk."

He went back to his desk, took out the tape he had made requesting re-assignment to the Enterprise after her refit, and wiped it clean.

"That takes care of all the details, Commander. Now I'm sure you can fill me in on all the 'Fleet gossip. I've been out of touch for a long time." He offered her his arm, which she took possessively, and together they walked out into the corridor, McCoy falling into step behind them.

* * *

The cabin was bare, as comforting as the emptiness beyond its fragile hull. Spock had returned to it against his will. There had been little choice, for the crew and passengers of the liner followed a rigid schedule, and the next six hours were designated as the ship's night. Computer, recreational and all other facilities closed down, and except for those on watch all went dutifully to their beds.

He sat for some time doggedly trying to clear his mind in preparation for the first discipline of detachment. Though Sol still dominated the visible starscape and only hours separated the craft from the third planet, pride made him begin. His shame before the Masters would be great enough.

But the memories would not be chased away. His humiliation was total. Abandoning the attempt he switched on the viewer. Automatically it scanned all frequencies to locate a local station.

Its viewscreen filled with the colours and sounds of Earth, that world that had produced glorious perfection and terrible destruction, that had survived the crisis and stood poised on the future's edge. Earth had grown up.

Yet despite his long years among Humans he could find nothing within himself that tied him to his mother's world. He was Vulcan, by inclination as much as physiology. He knew he had shirked that responsibility; the fault lay not in his humanity, but in his failure to control it as a Vulcan should, just as he had been forced to control his Vulcan nature. That peculiarly Vulcan sense of loyalty he felt towards James Kirk threatened to smother the Human with its possessiveness. Leaving without a goodbye was a 'cop-out', but it was right; they had said goodbye once before.

The videos rambled on, the watcher only marginally aware of them. As the ship travelled on it caught up with the waves of earlier broadcasts, and Spock found himself watching a transmission of many days before, when he had just begun his wait for this ship that carried him to Vulcan.

The newsreader was replaced by a picture of a familiar face. The accompanying item caught Spock's attention.

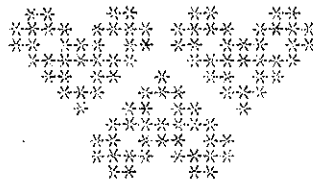
"The newly elected Altarran Council Leader, President Thur, today in Western City said he intended to pursue actively the policy of detente with the Romulan Empire. He said that an enrichment of both cultures had been most beneficial."

Spock smiled. It certainly had been beneficial to Camden Thur. The Vulcan would not have been surprised to discover that the whole venture had been designed by the Deputy with this result in mind. Whatever story - probably the truth - he had told to the Romulans after his 'capture', together with the Vulcan Council's abrupt about-turn to back the Federation's Altarran policy, had convinced them that discretion was in this case the better part of valour. The presence of Spock and Kirk had lent credibility to Thur's claims, and the Romulans had hastily withdrawn. Altarra, grateful for Thur's intervention and his seeming confidence in his ability to put the pieces back together, offered him the presidency with no strings attached.

The newsreader continued, "The President further announced the re-opening of negotiations with the United Federation of Planets for a trading franchise within the Altarran system. Diplomatic sources close to both Councils were hinting that this also re-opens the question of Altarra's admission to the Federation."

"Other stories coming up include the celebration of the Luna Base Bi-Centennial, and the return of the USS Enterprise on completion of her five-year mission. We have interviews with members of the crew, and a report on the reception given by Starfleet Command to honour Captain James T. Kirk. These stories and more follow this short message."

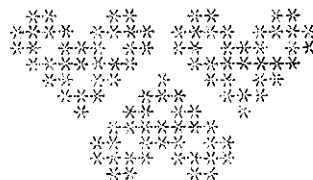
Spock switched off the machine and closed the shutters on the cabin's viewport. Then, with a determination that was wholly Vulcan, he put the hurt and pain from his mind to meditate on the attainment of Kolinahr, and its promise of peace.



THE UNIVERSE

As I swept through the Universe
 I saw shapes of all sizes.
 As I floated by, space made me feel uneasy.
 I felt as if I was surrounded, and yet deserted.
 The ebony background was filled with
 distant glittering stars.
 I could hear the whooshing of a shooting
 star as it whizzed past.
 There was a crimson and peachy candy-floss shape,
 a violet catherine wheel and russets
 Violet, mauves, golden, erupting shapes.
 The colours made me feel weightless and excited;
 I couldn't wait to see the rest.
 I felt as if I would be up in space
 For ever, and ever, and ever.

Sharon Stockley





FUTURE SHOCK

by

Vicki Richards

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"The sensors indicate an unidentified object ahead, Captain." Chekov turned from the library-computer station with his usual earnest expression.

"Unidentified, Mr. Chekov?" said Kirk, slightly amused. Chekov, always good at his job, strove so hard to be always improving his performance, that Kirk was sure he was unaware how much he began to sound like Spock, whose example he tried so hard to follow whenever he was on duty at the Vulcan's science station.

"Yes, Captain," replied the young Russian. "Data is insufficient to identify the object positively, but I believe it to be a vessel of some kind. Whatever it is, it seems to be broadcasting signals which are interfering with our sensor scans."

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov. Lieutenant Uhura, order a yellow alert..." Kirk was about to add, 'and call Mr. Spock to the Bridge,' but right on cue the turbolift doors opened and the tall Vulcan stepped out. Strange how he always knew when his Captain needed him...

"Spock - see if you can make any sense of the sensor readings," ordered Kirk. "Mr. Chekov reports an unidentified vessel ahead which doesn't want to be scanned."

The Science Officer listened to the Ensign's rapid report, then turned to the library-computer viewer himself. Shortly, he straightened.

"Mr. Chekov's report was quite correct, Captain," was his verdict. "The object does seem to be an unidentified vessel; fairly large, though not as large as the Enterprise. The jamming effect it appears to exercise on our sensors prevents me from estimating its size accurately, though I estimate it to be approximately 654 feet in length. There appear to be no life-forms aboard, and it is likely that the vessel is drifting. I cannot be certain these assumptions are accurate. I suggest that we investigate."

Kirk nodded. As usual, he agreed with Spock's suggestion. "Very well, Mr. Spock. Mr. Sulu - bring us alongside her."

With his usual skill the helmsman piloted the great starship, according to his instruction. Within minutes, the Enterprise was holding a position alongside the alien vessel, just far enough away for safety's sake.

"The sensors still give incomplete and possibly inaccurate information, Captain," reported Spock. "There is definitely a device aboard the vessel interfering with our scans. However, I am now certain that there is no life aboard. Also, the vessel is clearly of an unknown and advanced design and origin. I suggest I investigate."

"Alone, Mr. Spock?" Kirk could tell that his Vulcan friend was itching with curiosity to get over there and see for himself. So was he, for that matter. Now they were within visual range they could see that the strange ship was indeed of a design they had not encountered before. She was a beautiful, majestic craft; not as beautiful as his Enterprise, of course, but a lovely ship nonetheless. There were no markings on her, no serial number, or anything to denote her origin. She was clearly of an advanced design, as Spock had said. Where the craft had come from was anybody's guess at that moment, especially since Spock said he couldn't identify her. If he didn't know where she came from, then it was obvious that she didn't come from any civilisation they had made contact with before. There was a great deal about the strange, lovely ship that Kirk wanted to find out. Curiosity wasn't the Vulcan's sole preserve.

"There may be advanced self-defence mechanisms still in operation aboard her, Captain," replied Spock. "Also it is possible that a large boarding party might unintentionally damage something of interest. We do not know as yet what

form the interior design of the vessel takes; judging from the advanced design of the exterior, it is only sensible to assume the interior to be equally advanced. Logically it must be the Science Officer who makes any initial investigation. I will beam over and investigate, naturally taking all precautions. As soon as I have ascertained the nature of the vessel's design, and its safety, it will be possible for others to join me."

Kirk felt tempted to ask Spock was he trying to nursemaid him again; but not on the Bridge. Spock was probably right, anyway. As usual.

"Very well, Mr. Spock. Do what you need to. I'll join you over there as soon as your initial investigations are complete." The silent 'take care' had no need to be spoken.

"Thank you, Captain."

* * *

Spock left to collect the equipment he would need, then headed for the hangar deck. With the alien device aboard the strange vessel affecting the sensors, it could not be ascertained that the transporter would operate efficiently either. Spock intended to take no chances. Hopefully he would be able to locate the device and render it inoperative; then Jim, and more personnel from the Science Section, could beam over without risk.

He checked the life-support suit he had felt it necessary to wear, then boarded the Columbus. Keeping constant radio contact with the Bridge of the Enterprise, he took the shuttlecraft out and guided it over to where the mysterious vessel lay silent against the starfield, an alien enigma.

Skilfully the Vulcan docked the Columbus with the strange starship. He made a final check of the connecting airlock tube, not totally trustful of the alien device which enabled the shuttlecraft to join with the strange ship. Many Federation vessels had such devices incorporated into their exterior design, of course, as did many non-Federation vessels, as a matter of practicality. Yet Spock did not trust something which was outwardly so similar on a ship that was anything but. There had been too many occasions when an apparently innocent device had sprung a nasty surprise on them. Spock planned to be very careful.

After a last-minute check of the suspect sensors, and a call-in to the Enterprise, he entered the airlock tube. Within three minutes he had entered the alien craft without any difficulty. The tricorder appeared to be operating perfectly; it indicated a breathable atmosphere. Spock removed the helmet of his life-support suit.

The sight which met his eyes was truly worth the trip over. If the ship appeared advanced from the outside, from the inside it was positively superior. Spock advanced carefully through the vessel, noting with approval the design of the ship and her attendant technology.

He saw advanced, improved versions of most equipment the Enterprise carried; also some items which were as yet only hypotheses in the minds of Federation scientists, together with some equipment which he could not identify without closer examination.

The interior of the vessel was also aesthetically pleasing. Clearly the race who had produced such a ship would have a great deal to contribute to Federation life.

The Enterprise's sensors had been accurate on one point - the huge vessel was completely devoid of life except for himself. Still taking the utmost care, Spock continued on through the ship; he had to discover where she had come from, and the name of the race who had built her.

Unerringly he found his way through the maze of corridors to the ship's main control centre, a large, hexagonal chamber in the very centre of the vessel, which seemed to serve as the alien's Bridge. Though the ship was darkened and quiet, even lacking the normal computer noise which formed a background to daily life on most deep-space vessels, it was not entirely dead. Doors opened silently

for him; life-support still functioned, even if the air and temperature were not completely comfortable by Vulcan or Human standards; and when, on finally reaching the control centre, he began carefully to bring the main computer circuits to life, they responded to him as if it was his own library-computer station he sat at.

An insistent bleeping broke the silence, adding to the small noises made by the awakening computer. Obviously he hadn't called in to the Enterprise often enough for Jim's liking. Obediently he took out his communicator and flicked it open.

"Spock to Enterprise - yes, Captain?"

"Mr. Spock, this is an order," came back Kirk's exasperated voice, "and one I expect to be obeyed. Next time, don't leave it so long between reports. The sensors aren't working efficiently enough for Mr. Chekov to keep track of your life-form readings. The interference seemed to grow marginally worse once you boarded. And don't forget we can't transport you out of any trouble you get into. Now tell me - what have you found over there?"

"A fascinating ship, Jim," Spock couldn't quite keep the enthusiasm out of his voice, "and one which contains many items of interest and value to the knowledge of Federation scientists. So far I have encountered no difficulties, nor any of the self-defensive devices I anticipated. The vessel appears to be completely abandoned, and so far I have not been able to discover any information as to the crew's reasons for leaving the vessel, or of their origin and present whereabouts. At this moment I am attempting to activate the main computer; I hope to have all relevant information for you within a few minutes. Then I will be able to locate and disengage the device interfering with the Enterprise's sensors and transporter."

"Okay, Spock," came the reply. Kirk was satisfied that the Vulcan was safe for the present, but he wasn't going to feel really comfortable until he was over there too. "Kirk out."

Spock hitched the communicator back onto his belt and returned to the computer. First things first. Quickly he located the device he had to render inoperative; as he had suspected, the computer confirmed that it was situated within the small spherical object suspended within a transparent column which ran from the chamber's ceiling to the floor, exactly in the centre. According to the computer, the device could only be turned off manually. Still maintaining every possible precaution, Spock approached the column.

What Spock did not know - could not know - was that he was walking into a trap. Even a Vulcan could have no way of knowing that the alien machinery was so advanced it was capable of giving the tricorder totally false readings. Even Spock, the brilliant scientist, had no way of telling that as he walked forward, with every intention of examining the glowing column without touching, that he was walking directly towards an invisible, undetectable force-field that would activate a certain section of the vessel's hibernating technology the second he touched it.

Spock touched the force-field. His Vulcan senses told him he had touched it even before the ship came suddenly to life around him. It was not powerful enough to harm him, only to make him stagger back a step or two, surprised, as the lights came on in computer banks all around him, and the silent engines sprang powerfully into being with a surge of noise.

As he watched helplessly, holding on to any support he could find to brace himself against the sudden inertia as the ship went into faster-than-light travel far less comfortably than the Enterprise, Spock knew he was in trouble. The tricorder readings made no sense at all, and he had no idea where the strange ship was taking him, much less any idea of how to halt it. He had the impression that during the first split-seconds after he had touched the force-field his communicator had cracked; he had the faint memory of Kirk's voice trying to get through to him, but it had been too garbled with static.

for him to understand.

Spock found he could not gather his thoughts properly; it disturbed him greatly to lose complete intellectual control, but as the ship's momentum increased he knew that he was being taken far from the Enterprise, further than any known technology could take him.

Finally the ship's speed began to decrease; at first it was barely noticable, then it became definite. Finally the alien vessel stopped and its lights went dark, leaving it drifting silently through the galaxy once more.

But which galaxy? As Spock gathered his scrambled thoughts and made his way unsteadily to the nearest observation port, he knew that he was really in trouble. The constellations were familiar after all, but the chronometer on the arm of his suit told a chilling story. No wonder he had felt that the ship was doing far more than travelling at high warp speeds; there was no doubt in his now-clear mind as he completed his mental calculations. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that although he was not very far, physically, from where the Enterprise waited - or had waited - for him, he was indeed very far from his ship and his friends.

He was fifteen years in the future. The implications sent a shiver through him that no Vulcan control could suppress.

* * *

Spock spent the next three hours trying to master the alien computers, with only partial success. The proximity to the force-field, now apparently inactive, appeared to have damaged the tricorder. The useful machine simply refused to function, and Spock had no tools with which to repair it.

Now he was without its aid, he had no alternative but to attempt translation of the alien machine mentally. The technology was indeed so alien to anything he had previously had contact with that Spock was forced to rethink completely many theories merely to gain the barest of information from the ship's memory banks.

He did discover the origin of the ship; a highly-advanced race had created her - she had come from another galaxy, 156.98 years in the future. From the information he could glean, the vessel was an experimental model, sent accidentally back into his time and galaxy, where it had waited for the Enterprise to discover it.

So not only did he have an alien, unknown craft to deal with, but also an untried craft. The problems facing him were enormous. For once Spock didn't bother to calculate the odds; he didn't particularly want to know what chance he had of returning to his own time, and the Enterprise. He wondered absently what McCoy would think of such an unVulcan trait.

There was no doubt about it - something was still affecting his thought processes. Or, more specifically, his emotional control. Perhaps the time-change had done it. The thought crossed his mind that he might be affected by being in the same time as his future self. And that thought brought more problems - and, he had to admit, more worries. Firmly he regained control; this was no occasion to allow his Human side to interfere with the actions and decisions he had to make.

One thing was certain - he had to avoid discovery at all costs. The dangers of meddling with the time-stream were far too great for him to risk contact, or any action which might damage it. Spock had no desire to be responsible for altering destiny.

It was probable that, given enough time, he would be able to understand completely all systems of the alien starship which had imprisoned him in the wrong time, but such a study would take far too long now that he could not use the tricorder to aid him in the translation of the alien concepts used. Somehow, he had to discover how to operate the time-changer himself, in the hope that he could return himself to the time he had left. Failing that, he had only one choice, to attempt to conceal himself and the vessel permanently, with all the

attendant risks of eventual discovery before he had been able to complete his study of the craft. Then another choice entered his mind; if he could not return to the time where he was meant to be, and found complete concealment impossible, then he would have to cause the ship to self-destruct, and he would be left in the future, alone, with no other choice then but to live out his life in solitude on some deserted planet.

Neither choice appealed to him; and he could not make himself think of how it would be, to have to live through the long years alone, knowing that in all possibility Jim Kirk still lived somewhere in the galaxy, believing that he, Spock, was dead.

He had to have help, and he knew it. Somehow he had to have the equipment necessary to enable him to understand the alien computers quickly. Use of a Federation computer, or even a tricorder in working order, would be all he needed, but how could he obtain either of those things without discovery?

The thought crossed his mind of attempting to contact the Enterprise. Jim and McCoy, and the Enterprise crew, had had enough experience of dealing with the fragile stuff of the time-stream to make contact with his friends, fifteen years on, less hazardous than contact with anyone else. But there was the possibility, if his attempt to return to his own time was successful, that he would meet his future self during the course of such an action. The hypotheses of the results of such an event were numerous, most of them fraught with risk, and Spock did not think that meeting his future self was a good idea at all.

There was also the stark possibility, which he did not wish to contemplate, that in fifteen years something could have happened to the Enterprise - or worse, to his friends, even if they were still serving aboard her after all that time. The bottom line was, even if there were no risks attached to attempted contact with the Enterprise, there were certain things that Spock, Vulcan or not, simply didn't wish to know.

* * *

The next hours were spent in rapid study of the craft which had removed him from his own time and the home he had finally found. He was too near the most heavily-populated areas of the galaxy to avoid detection for long, and he had to gain enough control of the ship to take her to an area where detection was less likely. Schooling himself to mental control, he forced himself to concentrate all his energies on the task in hand, refusing to allow the fears of long years of loneliness to affect him.

Yet they did affect him, and although he was at least partially successful in determining which were the navigational controls of the vessel, and their method of operation, by the time that he looked up from his study he knew without the shadow of a doubt that his emotional control was badly affected. Or why was he feeling like he did?

He had to make the attempt soon; crossing to the alien helm, which appeared to be anything but what it really was, Spock experimentally began to put the knowledge he had gleaned from his studies into operation. The powerful engines of the vessel hummed into life as he ordered them, and with satisfaction he noted that the helm did actually function as he had calculated. As confident as he could be of his ability to pilot the strange ship single-handed, Spock now had to decide where to go. He didn't have too many choices.

He simply had to have another tricorder; but where to obtain one? Searching his mind, he remembered that, three months after the time he had been taken from, an archaeological survey had been due to start on Cathos IV, a planet in the Cassiopeia region. The remains of an advanced civilisation had been discovered, and such was the complex nature of the research needed that the survey team had been expected to remain there fully eighteen years. If the random factors operated in his favour, they should still be there. Cathos IV was isolated enough to make his landing there relatively risk free. Still trying not to think of the lonely future he would have to endure if his mission was

unsuccessful, Spock laid in the course.

The alien vessel was capable of Warp 15. He wondered what the Enterprise's Chief Engineer would have to say about that. Spock used the time during the computer-controlled journey to study the ship further. The Columbus had been unceremoniously ejected by the strange starship when he had inadvertently sent it into time-travel. His search for the method used for making planetfall ended when he managed to locate the transporter, an extremely timely discovery since he no longer had the use of the Enterprise shuttlecraft.

Of course it was logical to assume that a race capable of designing such an advanced ship would naturally be capable of designing a transporter mechanism, and now that he had found it Spock was relieved to discover that fathoming the use of its controls was a great deal easier than understanding the operation of the time-changer. The device also appeared to incorporate an automatic retrieval system. It appeared to work by recording an individual's brainwave pattern, then bringing that particular individual back to the craft after a pre-set interval. An extremely useful device; if Spock did get his hands on a tricorder, there were a great many things about the strange craft he intended to record for possible future use on the Enterprise. If he ever got back to the Enterprise.

The ship automatically went into parking orbit around Cathos IV. By that time Spock had discovered how to bring the vessel's shielding mechanism into operation. Spock expected the scientific colony to have merely the tools required for their survey; it was unlikely they would possess the powerful sensors capable of detecting a ship in orbit, but he was taking no chances. As he carefully programmed the transporter to set him down on the planet's surface, setting it for automatic retrieval in exactly three hours, he was only too aware of the great sense of loneliness beginning to affect him, far worse than the loneliness he had known before finding Kirk's friendship. Now he had friends, and a home - or had possessed those things fifteen years ago - and he was not at all certain that he could face the rest of his life without them.

The transporter, as silent as the Klingons', operated perfectly, setting him down on the planet's surface without detection. It was nearing dusk, and although that side of Cathos IV was in the middle of its summer, it was far colder than Vulcan, and the warmer areas of Earth. He was gratified that his planned stay was of only three hours' duration.

And it appeared that he would need all of those three hours to accomplish what he planned. On climbing the nearest high ground, Spock discovered that the alien ship's sensors had performed slightly less efficiently than the transporter. He had believed the scientific colony to be approximately one mile in distance; now, watching its distant lights twinkle in the gathering gloom, he could see that in reality he had some five miles to cover, over not particularly hospitable terrain.

Immediately Spock set off. His only chance of returning to his own time lay in finding a working tricorder, or its fifteen-years-on equivalent. A scientific colony such as the one on Cathos IV had great need of many tricorders, and he was fairly certain the loss of one would not be critical to them.

But it was critical to him. As he strode along through the cold evening, using a large part of his reserves in fighting the effect the low temperature was having on him, he found he could no longer control the dreadful sense of loneliness. He tried not to think of what would happen if he was unsuccessful; to contemplate the life of isolation he would have to face was almost too much to bear - and the thought of Kirk, living an equally lonely life, thinking he was dead...

And the worst part would be that he, Spock, would be unable to do anything about it for fear of altering the time-stream through some unknown factor; of damaging the universe itself. He would not dare to try and contact Kirk; how could he risk harming his friend?

A mental shudder passed through him. Resolutely he raised his mental barriers

again, so far as he was able, refusing to dwell on such thoughts. His emotional control might be affected, but his determination was not; Spock plodded doggedly onwards.

* * *

The terrain was indeed rough, so rough that it took Spock almost two hours of hard effort to reach the outskirts of the colony. A Human would have taken far longer.

But now he had merely 65 minutes before the transporter's automatic retrieval system took him back to the alien starship. He had to work fast - but he had to be careful. He had his phaser still, but knew that he had to avoid its use if at all possible. Certainly he would only use it on stun, but to avoid any risks he simply had to remain undetected.

Carefully, Spock skirted the scientific colony, keeping far enough away from the domed buildings to avoid detection. He could see no guards, and no outward evidence of sensor equipment; Cathos IV was far enough inside Federation territory for there to be little need of precaution against attack.

He moved without a sound, a tall, silent figure barely visible in the night. Eventually he decided on a small, apparently deserted entrance. The chance had to be taken soon. Quickly, silently, Spock crossed the intervening ground and operated the wall-located control panel. The door slid open with just a trace of hissing, and Spock was inside.

His entrance seemed to have gone as unnoticed as he hoped it would, but he took the precaution of immediately finding a place of concealment. Not that he could afford to remain there long - he now had barely 45 minutes left.

It was fortunate that Spock was familiar with the design of Federation outposts; treading soundlessly as a cat the Vulcan made his way towards the area he knew was most likely to be where the survey team kept their stores.

The random factors did seem to be with him. Most of the colony personnel were probably sleeping at that hour, but on the two occasions when late-working scientists did pass him, they were too engrossed in conversation with each other to notice the tall figure hiding in the shadows.

The stores were where he had expected them to be, and almost immediately he entered he saw several tricorders staked on a storage unit. But the large room was not empty; Spock realised someone else was present just in time to conceal himself behind a convenient packing case. Within a few moments he had realised that the man was unlikely to leave soon; he appeared to be stocktaking, checking supplies. And Spock had very little time left.

For thirty minutes Spock crouched behind the container, silent and without the slightest movement. Still the man walked the storehouse, crossing off items on his clipboard. He gave no indication that he was anywhere near finishing his task.

For vital seconds more Spock still crouched there, knowing that any move he made had to be soon, or never. Then things finally turned the Vulcan's way again; the man's task led him to stand no more than six feet in front of Spock's hiding place. Then he turned his back. Immediately, Spock took the only chance he could.

With two soundless strides Spock reached the man. He had his hand on his neck within instants. The Human crumpled, to be laid gently on the floor by a thankful Vulcan.

Then Spock had his hand on the precious tricorder, only seconds before he felt the transporter process begin.

* * *

There had been many times in his life before when he had worked rapidly, but very few occasions compared with the effort he now put in to understanding

the very complicated systems of the time-changer. The improved tricorder operated efficiently, and Spock could only hope that its loss, or the occurrence of a member of the survey team apparently passing out for no reason, would do nothing to affect the time-stream.

But would it, anyway? Wasn't the future, now? There were so many theories as to the nature of time, and as yet no real answers. The situation compared very readily with the understanding of the Theory of Relativity in the 20th century. Some had believed then that faster-than-light travel was impossible, not knowing that they were misinterpreting Einstein's work.

If some of the present theories were correct, then Spock was taking a chance in carrying the improved version of the tricorder back with him. He did think of ejecting it, but saw no valid reason. He understood it now, and if his return was successful, logically he would use those improvements and design a copy. Was he, Spock, to be the one who would introduce the new tricorder now aiding his return?

The nature of time was supposedly so fragile that Spock just couldn't take any chances. But his own experiences led him to believe that the actions he was taking at that moment were meant to happen. Perhaps time was not so easily alterable after all.

But for the moment, his thoughts were concerned with his return. He fully understood the time-changer now, and had set it to return him to within seconds of the time he had left; he had only to activate it. If he was successful, it would return him to the time and place where the Enterprise waited; if not - oblivion. But Spock considered oblivion immensely preferable to the future he would face otherwise.

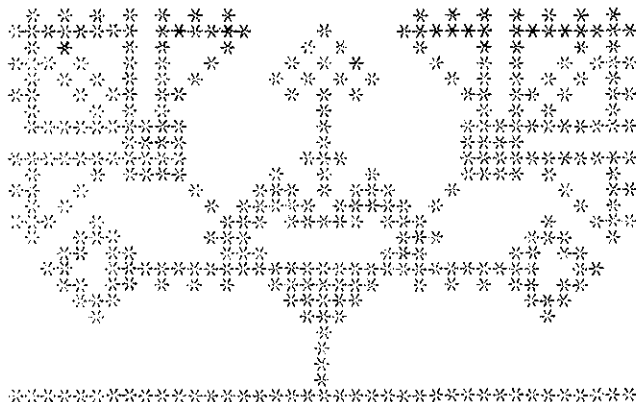
He hesitated momentarily before touching the heat-sensitive switch, not knowing fully why he did so. Then he became aware that the vessel's sensors indicated another ship had taken up orbit around Cathos IV. Checking, he was more than surprised to learn that it was a Constitution-Class Starship. Or... was he? Perhaps it was what he should have suspected. Checking the visual sensors, he confirmed the suspicion that had sent a chill down his spine. There were the serial numbers... NCC - 1701.

Hardly daring to think about it, Spock set the computer to monitor communications transmission. He just could not risk making direct contact.

Then on audio he heard the sound he had most wanted to hear, a sound which no amount of control could prevent his heart from jumping at. It was Jim's voice, in quiet conversation with another - his own. They were still there.

Through all the dangers, all the chances of time and fate, they were still there, and had come to monitor his return.

Spock smiled, and activated the time-changer.



SHADOW KIRK

by

Sheryl Peterson

Like a phoenix
 Did I rise
 Out of the ashes
 Of your sorrow.
 I wore the face
 You thought was lost,
 Denied you,
 Ever again.
 But all I knew
 Was who I was.
 My memories
 Were all there.
 So why did you act
 So strongly,
 Calling me, not Jim,
 But James?

Spock, who claims
 To have no feelings
 Yet Humanity
 Incarnate,
 What I would not give
 To be your Kirk
 If the gods would
 But allow!
 There was such
 A pain behind your eyes
 That would ever
 Divide us.
 Yet though
 It cost you dear,
 You'd grant me what was his...
 For now.

I was Kirk!
 Why did you say no?
 Spock, who else
 Could know me better?
 Though our blood
 Is different colours
 Yet who is more
 Part of me?
 But you said
 That I was false,
 That He was dead,
 I but a shadow.
 Yet you would
 Give me His place
 If it was where
 I chose to be.

For a moment then
 I dared to hope
 That at long last
 I had come home,
 And that with you
 I could find peace,
 Put an end
 To doubts and fears.
 But then He came
 Who was your Jim,
 And from then
 I was outcast.
 James -
 Born out of no one,
 Doomed
 To empty, faceless years.

